

# Redivivus

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The most important thing Ryuk learned watching Light Yagami was how to follow the rules to the letter and still break them.

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# Chapter 1

## Redivivus

Ryuk had never been on Kira's side or L's. He'd made that perfectly clear on several occasions.

But Ryuk *was* on Light's side. He couldn't help it, really - he was the best thing that had ever happened to Ryuk, the best person who could have picked up his Death Note, and Ryuk was as hopelessly fascinated with him as the poor detective Light killed with a smile. They called him a human's pet in the Shinigami Realm, but Ryuk defied any one of them to spend a week with Light and not be sucked in.

He didn't stay close to Light because of the rules. He could leave at any time. He'd scout out places for Light (for apples) check if there were cameras or people or interesting things. When Light slept, Ryuk would slip through walls and wander the streets looking for those humans awake and out at that time of night, searching ceaselessly as ever for entertainment. But when Light woke it was to Ryuk's face hovering above his, wings spread like a hideous canopy, as if he'd never left at all.

Light was interesting. It was that simple.

Ryuk would spend every minute at Light's shoulder, watching him eating lunch, being bored in class, talking with - hah - friends and at the end of the day even he would begin to doubt that Light was Kira. That was interesting - to see how completely and utterly he could hide within himself. But with the Death Note in his hands, that was when things really got exciting. Kira, and the use to which he put the Death Note to, was *wonderful* . He'd write names in the Death Note with his left hand and he'd solve homework equations with his right. He plotted murders with a smile, destroyed lives with a laugh, and then slept deeply and dreamlessly. He teased at the problems L and

his successors and the police threw at him, unravelled them, studied every facet of their innards and then put them back together again, so precisely and subtly different that nobody but him would ever untangle them again. He calculated every action and every probable reaction - and then he considered the responses he could give for every single one of those reactions.

A never-ending basket of apples within reaching distance and Ryuk would be happy to do nothing but watch Light forever.

Ryuk said he wasn't Kira's side, and if he wasn't on Kira's he certainly couldn't be on L's, but Light knew every problem and potential threat and Ryuk knew Light - it didn't *matter* that Ryuk wasn't on his side. If it were necessary, Light would find a way to *make* him tip the balance to Kira.

He'd enjoyed seeing Kira surface when he refused Light something, and even more than that he'd enjoyed seeing what Kira would come up with to sidestep his rejection, automatically adapting his strategies around Ryuk's whims. It made Ryuk feel ridiculously important that Light should be forced to alter his careful, exacting plans because of him. (The detectives didn't count - Light had not only taken stock of their defences and responses, he'd assimilated them). He would let Light bribe him with apples and vague promises of interesting things; he played games with Light and knew Light was at the same time playing far subtler, more complex games with him.

He remembered Rem, puzzled and incredulous, hating Light and demanding to know what he saw in the boy, why he didn't kill him, the arrogant human, treating him like a particularly dim pet. It made Ryuk laugh. Poor Rem, masterfully outmanoeuvred and destroyed with her own love. Ryuk liked to think that in the moment of her death, realising how skilfully Light had backed her into a corner, into destroying herself for him, she understood what it was that made Light glow among humans.

( *kira*, he had said one night to the sleeping Light, meant something entirely different in the Shinigami tongue, something deeper and

darker without a proper equivalent among any of the human languages. The closest thing he'd heard, he supposed, was 'god killer'.

Ryuk thought it suited him, this human who was more of a death god than any Shinigami. Light would kill him one day, just like Rem and Shidoh, because sooner or later his need for Light to live and play his far-reaching games would outweigh his desire to stay alive and find other, different interesting things.)

For Light and apples Ryuk was willing to do pretty much anything.

But. He wasn't on Kira's side. And it wasn't Light that begged him for help.

So when the time came, he wrote Light's name with every appearance of amusement and dismissal.

*The human who uses this Note can go to neither Heaven nor Hell.* But Light knew all the rules and all the ways around them, and Ryuk had watched Light for so long, he had to have learned *something* . Not enough to be satisfied, not enough to be able to find things interesting that weren't in some way connected to Light and his brilliant and convoluted mind, but enough.

There were thousands of reasons Ryuk could give for his refusal to allow the proper things to take their course, but the only one he was willing to confess to was that he refused to be bored. And life without Light was boring.

Before he met the human known as Yagami Light, Ryuk might have been satisfied with the immense variety of humans scuttling around, living day to day and making the most of their pathetically brief lives.

Humans were fun, humans were *hilarious*, but-

After Light nothing was the same in either the human or the Shinigami world and sometimes Ryuk wondered if he ruined Light or

if Light ruined him. Then he shrugged and decided that it didn't matter which one of them had altered the other because he'd liked watching Light and Light had enjoyed sharing the inner workings of his beautiful intricate plots and traps with Ryuk. So many of Kira's best, most cunning and ruthless mini-games began with the announcement 'You might find this interesting, Ryuk.'

Ryuk inevitably did.

They fed off each other's attention, he supposed. (Maybe Light felt that honour went to L, but Ryuk was there first. So... hyuk hyuk.)

Light was one in a million, a billion, something unique that would never occur again, L had known that - and so did Ryuk, and better.

He'd played with humans before, he'd watched other shinigami try since and none of them had come even slightly close.

It wasn't that he felt he *owed* Light something - ridiculous, because if he and Ryuk shared anything other than a desire to avoid boredom, it was a certain disregard for human life; nothing would have changed that, Death Note or no Death Note, Ryuk thought. He didn't believe his presence had brought Light misfortune - Light said himself that he'd been bored out of his mind, that the Death Note falling into his hands was the luckiest thing that had ever happened, was destiny. Light had made his own luck with it and was his own downfall.

No, he owed Light nothing. It was simply a matter of... interest.

That was how he pitched the idea to the Shinigami King, anyway.

The others could make all the pitying and derogatory remarks they liked about the decline of greatness (as if any of them were ever great in the first place, doing nothing but gamble, forgetting to even write names) and one of their kind being reduced to little more than a pet, but none of them could say they hadn't been entertained.

So Ryuk had made a deal out of Yagami Light for Yagami Light.

A second chance, a chance do things over, on the condition that he saved as many lives as he'd taken.

Time has innumerable dimensions moving concurrently, like the warp and weft of cloth, and history unfolds in countless ways - to take the single bright ribbon that was Kira, the thread cut short, and turn it back on itself was a small matter with the Shinigami King's blessing. *A human whose name is written in the Death Note may not be brought back to life.* But if that human hadn't been born yet, it wasn't, technically speaking, bringing them *back* to life, was it?

Besides, the thought of sharp-tongued maze-minded Light trapped in a wriggly little pink baby body was enough to send Ryuk into full-blown convulsions of laughter.

The mess it was going to make of the human world was just a bonus.

It was win-win as far as the King was concerned. If Light lost, the kingdom gained a very interesting new death god. If he won, there would still have been years of entertainment watching him work his way across the board in the meantime. The likelihood of the human winning was infinitesimal.

Ryuk's ever-present grin had only widened at the misjudgement before he went off to recover his human.

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"Impossible, Ryuk." Ragged and exhausted, so recently reconstructed the memory of bullet holes still bled sluggishly, and Light still had the arrogance to tilt his head back with an irritated scowl and speak to Ryuk, to the Shinigami that had killed him, as if he were an idiot. Ryuk would have been disappointed with anything less.

"Oh? Kira has finally found a task impossible for him?"

"... you've taken your lessons about human nature to heart, haven't you, Ryuk?" Kira's eyes were redder than the skins of the many, many apples Light had given him over the years. Fascinating, how the truth of him was visible at last. He liked those eyes much better than the time they had been wide and brown and blind to him. That Light was nice, in his soft, human way, but Ryuk had never been so impatient in his long, long existence as when he waited for Light's plan to fall into place, for him to get his memory back and start entertaining Ryuk once more.

That, and it had irritated Ryuk no end to realise that were still aspects of Light/Kira that were unknown to him.

By the time Ryuk had arrived in the human world, five human days after dropping his notebook, Kira was already waiting for him. Ryuk had watched him as he slowly remade himself further in a shinigami's image, watched him become colder, more cunning and ruthless and detached, watched as he gained sharp edges, became beautiful the way a finely crafted sword or a forest fire or a tiger was beautiful. Kira would kill his family if he had to, Kira would kill anybody if he felt he had to. Ryuk sometimes closed his eyes and listened to the scratching of pen on paper, to the low chuckles, and sometimes he opened his eyes expecting to see another shinigami (albeit one more conscientious of his duty as a death god) in front of him. Light would be furious at the presumption; Ryuk considered it the highest compliment he could give.

In the night, sleeping, Kira would melt away from Light's face like a bad dream and there would be nothing but an ordinary sleeping human in front of him. Ryuk once phased his hand through Light's ribs to tickle his heart and startle him into furious, hissing wakefulness. He never repeated the act after Light gave him a thorough and comprehensive lecture on the human body and its fragilities. After that he restricted himself to kicking him when he was truly desperate for attention.

On the cusp of sleep, Light was so different to Kira he'd thought that he'd known every part of the human there was.



But Light, blind to him, oblivious to the side of himself the Notebook revealed, that Light was... soft. Ryuk had watched him constantly at the viewing pools, as constantly as he'd watched him when Light had been his human, and Light-without-Kira was... soft. There was no other word for it. He was never boring, as Ryuk had discovered during their separation that other humans could be. But he was *different*, and he wasn't Ryuk's.

Ryuk had actually managed a pout when he'd seen how very different Light was while chained to the detective, and cursed the fact that with his Note buried he was no longer permitted to haunt the human world. He would have given his eyes freely to see the change up close.

"So?" he said curiously.

"Even appealing to my pride isn't going to help here," There was a first time for everything, Ryuk supposed. "Do you have any idea how many I killed as Kira?"

"Uhh. About a fifty a week...?" he hazarded, mouth twisting for a moment out of his permanent garish smile as he struggled to remember. There had been so many names, so many faces, and Light *might* be able to remember them all, but Ryuk had been interested the deadly games that resulted. The numbers had never been really important except for the sheer quantity of them surpassing anything Ryuk had ever seen before.

"A good, if very, very conservative estimate. We'll begin there, why not. Six years makes that..." he raised an eyebrow expectantly.

What was he, a calculator? Light was supposed to be the genius in this partnership.... Human terms, human months and weeks and days... that meant... "... fifteen thousand?"

"Nice try. Ryuk, one of the best estimates someone has made for the number of people I've killed over the last six years is over two hundred thousand. Now do you see my problem? I'm good, Ryuk,

but even I'm not *that* good. It's much easier to take a life by writing a name down than it is to save one."

Ryuk considered pointing out that Light had been dead longer than he believed and his last six years weren't the same as Ryuk's, then decided it was probably distracting and beside the point.

Light had talked to him about the Death Note and how he felt it cheapened human life once, early on, before he started forgetting the lives he took meant anything other than another game with L. He'd sat next to the window and told Ryuk it was ridiculous, how easy it was to kill, nothing more than a few scribbled characters and a picture in his mind. His hands were so clean it wasn't even funny, he'd said. Ryuk had watched his eyes above the momentary expression of discontent and had known Light was thinking that the only suffering all his killing would bring him would occur after his death, when he was reduced to nothing and wouldn't even know he was being punished. Ryuk, and Light's decision to pick up a black notebook, had meant that everything Light could ever do would have to be done before his death.

Ryuk tried to turn his head upside down while still attached to his neck. "But Light, surely you don't want to stay here?"

Light gave him a withering glare. Ryuk had seen him die, and he was *still* capable of making him fear for his life. A Death God. Fear for his life. Now *that* was impressive. "... of all the Shinigami out there I had to get *you* ." He muttered irritably. Ryuk tried to be insulted, but was far too used to Light to take offence. "No, Ryuk, I do not want to stay here. But the task is impossible, surely you see that."

Ryuk scratched at one wing reflexively, remembering Light's rants about L, Kira, humanity, L, godhood, criminals, morals, worship, L, optimism, right, wrong, L... "That's what L said about Kira's idea to change the world."

"... you really have gotten good."

Ryuk decided there might be something to the 'pet' jokes after all, that he felt pleased at a statement that was - in Light's inimitable way - both insulting and as complimentary as it got. "Games, Light. And apples. *Apples* ."

Light smiled. It was the first time Light had ever smiled at him without the sharp judgement of Kira behind it. Oddly, he thought of the detective, and how many of those smiles he had seen and not appreciated. Kira was fascinating, Kira was everything Ryuk could have hoped for when he dropped his Note... but sometimes he wanted Light, levelheaded human Light, wanted to see, to hear, to *know* the difference, wanted the chance the detective got and scorned for the sake of solving his case as 'Yagami Light is Kira'. Ryuk had wanted so desperately to see Kira-less Light up close, and Light's precious sanity anchor couldn't care less. He suspected there might be some of the poison humans called irony in there somewhere.

"You're doing this for yourself, you bastard." Light said, low and loving, speaking to an old, old friend, and Ryuk had to resist the urge to look and make sure they weren't, in fact, standing at L's grave or something.

"You wouldn't trust me if I weren't."

"Heh. When do I leave?"

## Chapter 2

Yagami Light was his mother's pride and joy, and there was no denying he was a bright, attractive boy, more than any mother could dare hope for. But sometimes he scared Sachiko.

It was nothing in particular she could put her finger on. It was a series of tiny, insignificant moments that she could not close her eyes to.

From the moment she held her newborn son and met his eyes for the first time she knew he was different, he was special, he was going to be something great. In the imperfect world she loved, he was going to shine like the sun; he was going to light the way for others.

She was content to tell anyone who asked why she named him Light using the kanji for 'moon'. It embodied everything her son would grow to be, she felt, she said with determination. There was prescience in her choice, the type that came from a faith that made the future easy to see.

The true reason (which was not the only true reason, just the only secret one) was that the first time his eyes had met hers she had not seen the cloudy unawareness of a typical newborn, but something bright and cold and ancient, staring at her from that smooth infant face.

" *Kami*," she had breathed, and let the nurses chuckle indulgently with the knowing understanding of women who had seen countless mothers react in what they believed was the same way.

She told herself in the cold daylight, watching her precious boy grow, that it had been overwrought nerves and the strain and shock and wonder of seeing her first child, but in the middle of the night with nothing to do but think she could stop pretending. Sometimes, even

in the day, she stopped pretending. Sometimes she couldn't help thinking that her child was not her child at all, that some ancient being wore her little boy's body like a clay mask.

She had no idea why a kami would choose to take a mortal shape, let alone that of her boy - beautiful though he was, perfect though he was in her mother-eyes - and go through the indignity of being treated as a human baby, but sometimes, sometimes she could think of no other explanation. Every so often, briefly, he looked at her with eyes too old and too wise and knowing and all her carefully crafted denials would slip away like morning mist.

His first word was not mother, not yes or no or any of the simple syllable words she expected. His first proper word at six months old was 'Kira'. She doubted he knew she was aware of this. It had been the middle of the night and she had been heading to his room to watch over his crib and she did every night when he was asleep. She heard his babbling from where she stood just outside the door, heard the frustration and determination in it as he painstakingly and insistently forced his mouth and tongue into obeying him and she *knew* - even if the books told her it was normal - that it was no more the unaware attempts of a baby than her own words were. Over and over he struggled with syllables, struggled to shape the vowels and consonants, struggled to force coherence from his tongue until at last one of his string of unintelligible sounds ended in *kira* .

There was a long silence during which she tried to convince herself that what she had been listening to was perfectly normal (for a genius, precocious child - perfectly normal). Then his delighted laughter broke the silence and he repeated himself with triumph undisguised in his babyish tones. "Kira," he said, slowly, quickly, over and over until he tired of it and moved on to other words.

(If she had stayed long enough she might have heard his very first sentence - "Shut up Ryuk! No apple!")

Quite what was so necessary or so fascinating to him about making the word 'sparkle' she suspected she would never know, just one of

the many things about her son that would forever be beyond her understanding.

She put away the memory of his diligent attempts to form words - or at least, carefully excised from her recollections everything that raised suspicions in her. When he babbled 'mama' one day soon after as she cleaned his face of softened peaches, her lack of delight even managed to surprise her. She cooed and clapped over him regardless, feeling oddly empty and cheated.

He was startlingly quick, once he began talking, to pick up new words and phrases; he spoke in full sentences long before Mrs Tanaka's boy began saying proper words at all, and Sachiko might have been proud if she weren't uneasy. Why she should be uneasy she wouldn't let herself know; her boy was very clever, that was all.

When he was old enough to sit upright by himself she held him in her lap every evening and read aloud to him, tracing his fingers along the characters as she spoke - from the very beginnings of her pregnancy, alight with hope and idealism she had planned to give her child every advantage she could think of.

He let her - *let her* - manipulate his tiny hands and followed the words with vague eyes. In any other child Sachiko might have labelled the look as obliviousness or lack of understanding, but in Light she could only call it boredom. Sometimes she had to stop in the middle of the book and tell herself that shaking him and begging for answers - begging to know why he would humour her in such a manner, insult her in such a way - was pointless. He wouldn't respond. Most of the time she was pretty sure she didn't really want to know.

Over and over there were moments when Light did or said something that Sachiko managed to convince herself was normal.

(Children had invisible friends, right? Toddlers had invisible friends, yes? Imaginary friends named Ryuk who wanted apples... shiny red apples...)

She was a mother for the first time, and she took pains to remain ignorant of the things that would force her to see Light as anything other than a very intelligent child.

It ended the morning she went downstairs to find him sitting in Soichiro's chair at the computer, tiny fingers slipping and tapping at the keys faster than she could, and she knew he was hindered by lack of reach and coordination. He had only recently gained the fine motor skills to hold objects between thumb and forefinger instead of in his fist. The faint green glow of the monitor made his face smooth and impenetrable in the pre-dawn light and there was nothing in him that was human; nothing that was hers at all. Little boxes and files popped up on the screen, codes dancing across them like butterflies in flight, and she turned away and went quietly upstairs.

He was two years and seven months old.

She had seen enough tiny, accumulative signs from her child (who was really only her child in that the body had formed within her womb) that the sight wasn't as startling or as disturbing as it should have been, but it still drove the breath out of her and she sat for a long, long time in the stillness of her son's room, willing herself not to weep.

Her child, her beautiful, *perfect* baby boy, and when she finally gave the situation the careful consideration it deserved, when the pain was no longer quite so raw, she wondered that she hadn't expected it. She had done nothing to deserve such good fortune in the form of her son, and she should have already known that a price would be asked that she couldn't pay.

(It just wasn't fair. She shouldn't be afraid of her own son.)

It was shortly after that incident that she brought up the possibility of another child with Soichiro. The pretence was over, though for Light's sake she would keep it up, just as he (she? it?) was careful to play the child for her.

When she became pregnant again a few months later, she prayed that her next child would be normal. A healthy, *normal* child, who would not look at her with sharp eyes, who wouldn't do un-babyish things behind her back. A child that wouldn't need to make deliberate mistakes with its speech, a child she wouldn't see judging its every action when she spoke to it, trying to imitate average behaviour.

("How is your friend Ryuk?" she remembered asking Light one morning, sitting in his high chair with all the imperiousness of a king. "Wouldn't he like something other than an apple?"

"No. Ryuk only like apples. He say they like alcohol for shinigami." He paused to consider her, and then confided seriously, "He's an addict."

"I... see..."

Any other child and she would have laughed. Any other child she would have responded in the same manner as Natsuko always did when she told her some of the things Light said, "... *what a darling imagination your boy has, Sachiko!*"

But... how many children Light's age spoke of shinigami? How many adults spoke of shinigami? Had she ever mentioned gods of any type in front of Light?

"He like red ones best." That, if Sachiko was not mistaken - and she wasn't - was an order.)

She expected questions like why are you getting fat, and how did the baby get inside and what was it doing there, but it seemed to suit Light - no, the thing that masqueraded as Light - to show honest disinterest in such matters. He would rest his sun-kissed head against her belly though, as it slowly grew rounder and rounder, listening to her heart and feeling the baby's movements beneath her skin and for the short duration of her pregnancy she nearly managed to convince herself she'd imagined everything.



Yet when he announced firmly that the baby would be a girl she didn't doubt him for a moment.

("Sayu," he said firmly. Soichiro wanted to name the baby Hoshiko if it was a girl, and Sachiko had agreed, more out of fear of what her last naming choice had brought her, but-

"Sayu," Light said.)

She continued to read to him, waiting for the moment he grew bored and gave her an out, and she was relieved, the day he finally snatched the book from her and declared with imperiousness that he would read. She'd hovered close by obligingly, but he'd traced the words without her help and deliberately mumbled several aloud, and in the end she'd turned away and gone into the kitchen. She didn't bother to lie and tell herself that she didn't hear him stop the moment she left the room.

She never attempted to bring up her suspicions with Soichiro. He was a busy man, he had an important job that kept him away far too much, and he didn't need further worry about his wife's mental state. He didn't need to know that she never left Sayu alone with Light, although Light was an attentive big brother who never showed any sign of jealousy or anger towards the new baby. (Light was, in fact, almost worryingly devoted. She wanted to ask sometimes what he saw in Sayu's future that he felt he had to make the most of her presence now.)

Soichiro didn't need to know that while he was gone and it was just herself and the children she made more noise than necessary travelling from room to room, to give Light time to hide or undo or simply destroy whatever it was he was doing out of her sight, so that she didn't have to face what she already knew.

He didn't need to know that she rarely spent time alone with Light any more, unnerved by his stillness and his smiles - his smiles were always a little too knowing, a little too self-aware, for all his advances in other areas of concealing himself.

No, it was best that Soichiro kept the illusion she had given up when she walked downstairs one morning and found Light typing at the computer - that their son was a prodigy, a genius. Nothing unnatural at all.

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"Ryuk."

*Hyuk hyuk.*

"I'm bored."

"Oh good. Interesting things happen when you're bored."

"... and when *you're* bored, the world gets turned upside down."

"Hey, I never *made* you use the Death Note the way you did."

"... riiight. 'Give it to someone else if you don't want it.' 'Never seen a human use it like you before.' 'Going to kill anyone today?' 'Hey Light, what you gonna do now? Looks like he's outmanoeuvred you.'... you couldn't have been more obvious if you were Misa."

"Still didn't make you do anything. And I'm bored too Light. What's the plan?"

"What do you say... to a game of L?"

"Sounds like fun."

"I knew you'd agree with me."

---

Nakamura Takeshi was thirty-four when he met God.

He had been watching the noonday sun, filled with the mild ache that comes to the religious after too long exposed to human ugliness without any of its redeeming beauty, when he felt an alien gaze on his back. He turned around, and there he stood, eyes solemn and

wise and mouth smiling slightly with the loving amusement of someone watching a friend make a fool of themselves but caring for them despite that.

He intended to ask where his mother was, if he was lost, but the child - tiny and ageless, dressed for shichi-go-san - had tilted his head, given a slow, self-aware smile that grabbed his heart and squeezed and said simply "Nakamura Takeshi," and in that moment he knew he was seeing God.

"My name is Kira," he said. "I have a proposition for you."

*Kira* . How oddly familiar that sounded.

"Where is your mother-" he wanted to say 'little boy' but the words stopped in his throat. No, impossible to treat God so disrespectfully, even if he clearly intended to be seen as a child.

"Mother is praying for my soul," he said wryly, his smile a bright flash of white teeth. "Pay attention now. You are thirty-four, unmarried. A forensics expert, you attended Tokyo Medical University and left with top scores. You are fluent in English and French, and an expert at self-defence. I am searching for an assistant of sorts. You will do me well."

Takeshi felt his mouth open, but couldn't understand why no words were coming out.

"I am... a detective." Kira tilted his head back and surveyed him with half-lidded eyes, and in the glow of the sun he was something else, the incongruous combination of the slender childish body with ancient eyes making him intensely beautiful and strangely terrifying. "Or, to be more precise, I will be. I need an assistant to help me and to act as my intermediary. I will provide all the equipment you need, and I can pay you very well. My one condition is that I am your first priority. You must be willing and able to help me at any time I require it, day and night. I am not an easy taskmaster, and I demand

obedience above all. If you do not feel you can fulfil those requirements, kindly say so now and I will find someone else."

"I..."

"You have... five minutes to consider it," Kira said pleasantly. "My mother will realise I am not at her side soon, and I may have difficulties contacting you again." The wry smile he made at this pronouncement would seem to mark it as a considerable understatement.

"... I... yes..."

"Are you sure? Regardless of time constraints, this is not a decision to take lightly."

"Of course I am sure, Kira-sama." He said and bowed deeply, honoured and over-awed.

The boy - god, *god* - flinched a little, but nodded his acceptance. "Good," he said, "Then let us discuss this further. Meet me at this address in a week. There is much work to be done."

Takeshi stared after him long after his mother appeared and dragged him away, apologising for any inconvenience her son might have been. God didn't look back, but Takeshi knew, despite the complete and utter lack of any visible difference in the world around him, that everything had just changed.

He would never ask any questions about how Kira knew so much, or why he decided on Takeshi or how he knew he'd say yes, he would never ask why he did anything the way he did. The moment his name was spoken by that falsely childish mouth he realised he would spend the rest of his life in servitude and be grateful beyond measure.

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L Lawliet, world's greatest detective (and, he decided as he meditatively licked his new lollipop, perhaps he should set up a new alias or two, or six, just in case) was intrigued. Not by his current case, a relatively mundane serial killer that he'd figured out three hours ago and was still debating on how best to bring in without completely breaking his ties with the police who hired him when they discovered it was one of their own. No, he was intrigued by the *lack* of cases from Japan.

He had requests from organisations all over the world (not on the scale that he one day would, he knew, but still an impressive amount) and over the past eight months requests for help with cases from Japan had at first slowed and then almost stopped completely.

He doubted the crime rate had suddenly dropped, and if he recalled correctly (which he did) the pattern mimicked something of his own appearance on the law enforcement scene. He had Watari bring up the files on his old cases just to be sure, and carefully refreshed his memory on the circumstances of his introduction into detective work. If he was correct in his suspicions, there was a new player in Japan who had already proved his bona fides on difficult cases and was rapidly gaining notice from the police force there. If he (or she, he reminded himself in the interests of equality) was as good as the sudden dearth of requests to L indicated, his reputation would eventually bring in offers from law enforcement outside Japan, until he was at a stage similar to L, able to pick and choose from unusual cases anywhere in the world. Interesting.

L wondered why he hadn't announced himself, as L and Watari had made sure to do on a grand scale that had brought a flood of unsolvable (for anyone else) cases from just about every country that possessed a police force in the world. Yes, a good - great, *brilliant* - detective would gather notice in time, whatever they did, but it was good to speed things along (not to mention it prevented boredom, which was vital as far as Watari was concerned because genius or no L was still nominally a child, capable of horrific things when bored).

He abandoned his (solved, completely, boringly solved) case for a moment, determined to find out more about this mysterious case-stealer from Japan.

Four hours later he was astonished to realise that all he'd managed to gain from his labour was a name. Impossible, and irritating; the records filed by police involved in his early jobs had contained more than that - usually about Watari, the means and reasons (read: excuses) for initiating or accepting contact, but still.

Yet he had *nothing* except a name.

Kira.

How... *fascinating* .

## Chapter 3

Criminals were the first to notice when Kira went international, much to L's chagrin. He couldn't work out how or why it happened, but word of Kira ran ahead of him throughout the underworld community like wildfire. They *feared* him as they had never feared L, and he didn't know why, only that his connections among the criminal element spoke of Kira as they would a malign god who had it in for them, and tended to refer to him by various epithets.

... Not that it wasn't useful to be able to find an underworld professional simply by the curious capitalisation of the word 'judge' or the odd appearance of the term 'heart-stopper' in casual conversation, but it was really quite irritating that he was so successful when L had been there first and spent far longer on the same endeavour.

He wondered if the other detective was responsible for the fear or if he'd noted it, taken advantage and named himself for it. He wouldn't have minded more time to try and discover the answer, but then Kira had seriously started to make his presence felt.

Kira, L had decided after six missed cases in four countries, had been born solely for the purpose of driving him up the wall. Possibly onto the ceiling.

He had thought it would a reasonably simple task to at least narrow his rival's position down further from Japan. He was quickly reminded why one of the first precepts of his job was to never underestimate anyone - and he'd never had an opponent quite like Kira.

He knew Kira was Japanese. He'd noted that Kira tended toward cases in the Kanto region, but that was insufficient to say he had a permanent base of operations there (conjecture, he had quickly discovered, was not permissible in this instance). Kanto was the

most densely populated area of Japan, it was only logical that more crimes were committed there, and that among those crimes there were more cases worthy of Kira's attention.

However, Kira's first appearances were concentrated in Tokyo, which validated the tentative hypothesis. Even if Kira had only chosen to appear there because of the vast metropolitan nature of the capital city, even if he in fact lived in another city and prefecture entirely (a piece of paranoia worthy of applause if it were true) the likelihood of him having at least a semi-permanent base there was higher than anywhere else.

He was sure that Kira had at least two permanent intermediaries in Japan - there was no other possible explanation for the fact that Kira had on occasion managed to work two cases simultaneously, often at separate ends of the country. L had been unwillingly impressed the first time he discovered this phenomenon of Kira's for being in two places at once; both had been difficult cases he would have worked on separately. Kira on the other hand, either had a high opinion of his own abilities or believed that time was his enemy. If the latter were the case, L would have to revise his estimate of Kira's possible age up several years. It had been at Watari's insistence that L had started contemplating what to do in case of his death; L himself was still bothered by the patently false notion that he was immortal. Probably it was that he had yet to cross paths with someone capable of making him doubt his own superiority. Perhaps if Kira had put his mind to committing the perfect crime rather than solving them-

Takeshi. That was the name of one of the intermediaries. Common enough that it might even be his real name and it wouldn't matter in the slightest, L having no way of narrowing it down further. He didn't know if he'd be annoyed, insulted or amused by the arrogance if it really was his real name.

'Masato' was the name given to the second. That was of course once they had finally realised there was a second. Masato had replaced Takeshi on several occasions without anyone among the



Japanese police noticing until Kira had pulled his second double case, Takeshi mediating in Tokyo and Masato in Osaka. It had still taken two weeks of poor communication before anyone other than L had realised Kira was working on both.

And then Kira had spread his wings, moved onto bigger countries and cities and cases and turned every tentative idea L had formed about him upside down. It could be bitterness talking, but L highly suspected Kira got a kick out of that.

The rules changed in an instant. Kira was no longer L's private obsession, but a regular topic of conversation among law enforcement authorities, a debate all the more frequent because Kira enjoyed toying with the police almost as much he did criminals and he allowed them the illusion it might be possible to find him.

Kira was not one person, it was believed, but a group, spread across the world. But L knew - though he couldn't say why he thought so any more than he could understand how exactly it was managed - that there was only one mind. It spoke in a dozen voices, had a dozen faces - and the mind behind them was laughing at him.

Kira was reckless, Kira trusted too much to others. Kira was brilliant, Kira wove webs that looked like single strands until you were walking among them and realised they were triple-layered.

Daedalus or Icarus?

Every country it seemed now had a Kira, and each Kira had someone who played Watari (L was first among anonymous world-class detectives, which logically meant Watari was first among all anonymous world-class detective go-betweens). Each Kira spoke with a different voice, had different reactions and attributes, specialised in different areas. Each was, to all intents and purposes, Kira. It was assumed that they communicated amongst themselves (detectives rarely liked to share credit, and the likelihood of over a dozen brilliant detectives suddenly appearing in a dozen different countries all using the same name was minute to say the least) but

the thought of there being an overarching mind behind all of them didn't seem to occur to anyone but L.

L watched the entirety of Kira's vast network intensely, trying to find a weak link. Surely it was impossible to maintain so many levels without at least one of them being less than devoted. Surely one of the many agents could be bought; it didn't matter if that one person was the lowest member on the intricate totem pole, if L could only *find them* it wouldn't matter. L was the first and the best, he knew how to get information from people that even they didn't know they had.

How did the chain work? Obviously Kira selected each of his Voices (from law enforcement databases? Must investigate that option further) but did the Voices choose their individual representatives? Did Kira trust their judgement on such a vital matter, or did he merely allow them the illusion, screening each candidate further before drawing them in? Or perhaps he did it all himself, the tedious process of finding likely options, selecting the best from among them, thoroughly investigating every aspect of their lives before setting up a meeting, gaining their loyalty and service and assigning them to the appropriate Kira?

Why did Kira feel the need to use so many false faces in the first place? The usefulness of any acquired agent would depend much on Kira's reasons for setting up such a system of affairs.

The more people involved the greater the likelihood of betrayal, willing or unwilling. Perhaps for Kira the benefits outweighed the potential problems, though L thought it a disappointing lapse on his part.

(Representative A led to false location C led to representative B with the potential to lead to Kira USA2, a trail cut off abruptly as if there really was nothing behind K-USA2. Was that how it was supposed to work, instead of being a long meandering line leading to Kira? True, there were plenty of points where the thread could be abruptly sheared off, and L had no doubt that any lead he managed to gain

would be cut as soon as his presence in the web was detected, but surely Kira knew he was deliberately setting himself up for a fall with this type of organisation?)

*Option A*, L decided, was that none of the Voices were anything more than an elaborate organic version of L's masking software, repeating verbatim Kira's reasoning, decisions, and conclusions for the listening police forces. None of them, if found, would be able to tell him anything of use.

*Kira involves so many mouthpieces to disorientate possible enemies and safeguard his own position. If one link is compromised, it can be terminated; the rest of the chain is left intact.* Ruthless enough to be possible.

*Option B*, dependant upon the recognition that sometimes it was necessary to physically be in the area of investigation, was that Kira was incapable or unwilling to leave Japan, thus necessitating the use of trained proxies capable of analysing the necessary data to the same level as their boss.

Lack of finance was not a likely obstacle, and it would have to be a physical disability of great magnitude to render all the possibilities and comforts money could buy irrelevant. He toyed with the idea that Kira was agoraphobic, before admitting it was only a petty desire to imagine his foe discomfited that made him consider it.

(Watari would point out that L could hardly talk when it came to dealing with the external world without the medium of a computer screen.)

Unwilling then. Perhaps, unlike L, Kira was constrained by external pressures, possibly a family unknowing of his vocation, as with Watari? Secretly L thought that to be unlikely; you couldn't be the class of detective Kira was if you cared so much for other people's opinions. Or lives.

Or did it simply amuse Kira to pretend weakness? Perhaps he *meant* for L to reach the conclusion that he was confined to one country, like a bird faking a broken wing to lead predators away from its nest. The minute L thought he was closing in and Kira would fly past him, crowing at his foolishness.

Hm. He did seem the type.

Or was it possible that it was a little of both options? The set-up required more trust than L believed Kira to be capable of (like recognises like when it comes to paranoia) but would explain why when Kira's outside Japan took cases out of the typical range - fraud, robbery, the occasional blackmail - 'Kira' showed less of the brilliance L expected. Highly capable, of course, and always successful, but without the underlying intensity and genius.

Watari had stopped bringing him news of Kira's doings when involved in such cases after the fourth time L had sunk into such a depressed mood as to ignore cheesecake. No doubt he also hoped that perhaps L would eventually lose interest altogether and stop acting like a stalker whose victim has gone into witness protection.

L, Watari was pleased to point out at regular intervals, lost an average of an hour a day to Kira. An hour, he would continue reasonably, could be important to a case.

L surprised himself with the realisation he couldn't care less. This game - whatever it was, with the rules changing every six months - was never going to get boring. Poor Watari would just have to accept it. Or take some courses in aversion therapy and how best to administer it and they'd see which one of them had the stronger will.

In the meantime -

He was going to make Kira rue the day he'd thought tormenting L with untraceable messages and packages was a good idea.

---

Eleven year old Light Yagami was a vicious, terrifying child. Ryuk adored him (or the shinigami equivalent thereof). At least, he liked Light when he wasn't pretending to be boring normal child, oblivious to certain death gods trying to catch his attention. Or sleeping. Which he rarely did any more, snatching hour long naps whenever he could; Ryuk could stand to lose Light's entertainment for an hour, he wasn't *that* desperate

"Light."

Light tilted his head the merest fraction of an inch to the right. *Shut up* .

" *Light* ."

He closed his eyes and kept them closed for exactly five seconds. *SHUT UP*.

It was an acknowledged fact between Light and... himself, really, that he wouldn't have made it through his second infancy without Ryuk's constant presence.

Even if Ryuk had found it extremely funny to mimic the standard female response to babies and croon various inanities at him while his mother was in the room, meaning that Light could neither glare at him nor throw anything without alerting Sachiko.

Even if Ryuk had poked and prodded him constantly in the first few months of Light's new life, and cackled at Light's furious glares and occasional screams of rage at his own helplessness.

Even if Ryuk had made constant sly remarks on how the mighty had fallen at Light's first attempts at talking, walking, sitting up - just about everything.

Ryuk had not become any less irritating.

"But Light..."

Light curled his tiny, tiny little hands into fists. It was still something of a wonder to Ryuk, the difference between Light's hands as a pen-wielding adult and as little child. He'd been particularly entranced by the little dimples they'd had when relaxed as a toddler, those were hilarious and the sight of them had always annoyed Light.

"Light, honey?" Sachiko asked, her brow furrowing minutely with concern as she folded Sayu's clothes. "Are you alright?"

Light nodded silently, flicking a resentful glance to Ryuk, hovering behind her. "I'm fine," he said stiffly, without the typical disorientating politeness he usually exhibited among human company. She gave him a penetrating look before lowering her gaze back to her hands and their vital work of neat folding.

"Liiight," Ryuk whined. The minute Light started to give himself away in company, Ryuk knew he'd won.

"... I'm going to my room," he announced quietly, resolutely ignoring Ryuk's victory jig in midair. "Homework," he added out of an almost forgotten instinct to qualify his actions.

He didn't ask her not to disturb him. Sachiko never asked after his activities. She exhibited exactly the right amount of interest to appear concerned, but never any more, and while Light could recall a time when it had been different, it had been a long time ago, and these memories were too fresh.

"Alright," he said coldly, locking the door and turning to face Ryuk with a grim stare the shinigami was quite certain he didn't deserve. "What is your problem?"

Ryuk rolled his head to one side (quite coincidentally in the direction of the apple bowl by the computer) and cackled with the solitary purpose of irritating his human companion.

Light stared. It had a little of the terrible flatness exhibited at L's grave, the first time he'd been there alone (of course, he'd ruined the

sentiment moments later by kneeling and shaking himself to pieces trying to stifle his laughter, but it was still a valid comparison).

Ryuk coughed. "Ah. Your slave-guy, the one you pulled a Mikami on-  
\_."

"I've pulled 'a Mikami', as you call it, on several people Ryuk. You'll have to be a little more specific about which devoted worshipper you're talking about."

"The first one. What's his name... Takeshi. Yeah. Y'know, servant number one."

"Uh-huh," Light nodded, padding over the computer and turning it on. How his mother convinced his father that a computer was an essential requirement for him he didn't know, but it had saved him time and effort and both of them remained unaware that its insides were not what they'd paid for. "What about him?"

"Oh nothing. It's just he called earlier and I kind of pressed the wrong button on your phone without meaning to-"

Light muttered something damning under his breath about shinigami and their curiosity.

"-and there was lots of shouting and gunshots and stuff."

"... is this your none too subtle way of saying that his lifespan reaches its expiration date about now and I should start looking for a replacement?"

"You think too much into things sometimes. I'm just saying it sounds like he's in trouble."

"A stunning example of the art of understatement, Ryuk. When was this?"

Ryuk snatched an apple from the bowl under the pretext that he needed fruit to think. "Half an hour ago? Took a long time to get your

attention you know."

"I was fulfilling my contractual obligation as first-born son to actually appear involved in family life." Light said, with a dignity seriously undermined by the fact that irritation at his 'contractual obligation' was still evident in the way he hunched over and glared at the monitor. "We'll assume the attempt to infiltrate the Yakuza went badly."

"Hyuk hyuk, pretty good example of understatement there too, Light."

Light made several calls and tried his hardest to pretend Ryuk wasn't contorting himself into odd shapes solely to see what happened to his shadow.

"Why don't you just give this up?" Ryuk said, voice oddly distorted by the impossible angle his head was in relation to his neck. "This human thing."

Light could disappear just as thoroughly as L. A runaway, a kidnap, a murder; Light Yagami would be wiped out. He had the money for it, and enough devoted servants for it. He just didn't want to. He needed the challenge, not just of the cases, but of maintaining two very different and separate lives simultaneously.

"This human thing?" Light demanded, spinning around in his chair to face him. "You mean this family thing? Didn't you used to say it reminded you of a sitcom?"

"Yeeeah," Ryuk murmured, stretching the word out thoughtfully as he straightened up and untangled his limbs. "But this detective stuff is just as interesting, and it takes time out from that. I like finding out what humans can do to other humans."

"I know that," Light said acidly, remembering quite clearly Ryuk's response to the discovery that Light was investigating a murder where the body had been dismembered and spread across Berlin in



seventeen plastic bin liners. To be fair, Light hadn't exactly been as horrified as he probably should have been, but Ryuk really hadn't needed to ask for such details. "You know perfectly well I'm not going to do this forever. I *could* arrange things with Takeshi to disappear, but that would be a mistake in the long run."

"s'always about the long view with you, isn't it?" Ryuk grumbled, flopping backwards onto the bed.

"And yet, shinigami are the immortal ones. How terrible." Light said dismissively, returning his gaze to the computer screen and busied himself with electronic maps and in the inner workings of the NPA data system.

Ryuk gave him ten minutes before he tired of staring at the ceiling and trying to remember where L had put all those cameras. "How'd that last L-encounter go?"

Light closed his eyes and scowled. "What encounter? Ryuk, you can't call it an encounter when the people involved have never met."

"But you have met," Ryuk protested, determined to push Light over the edge he constantly teetered on. Watching Light save people from their own stupidity was all well and good, but finding new ways to irritate him was, as far as Ruk was concerned, the best part of this new life.

Light ignored him and returned to splitting his attention between the monitor and the new voice on the other end of the phone giving a calm, measured account of just how many were wounded.

He really wished Ryuk wasn't his liaison between realms, or his official score-keep.

"So? What was his response to the sleeping pills? 'Cause if anyone needs 'em, it's him."

Light hung up after verifying Takeshi - and the men he'd sent in - were still alive and closed down the screens. "French police said Watari thanked me for the thought, but would suggest sending it directly to him next time if I wanted any success in the endeavour. L decided he might have to reconsider my gender in light of such maternal actions."

Light kept only one indulgence in his new existence of life-saving, soul-redeeming tedium. A stupid one, but as far as he was concerned, about as necessary as breathing. When he had time (and often when he didn't), he tormented L.

Light was not a playful person, regardless of Ryuk's views to the contrary. The immense overarching struggle of killing criminals and trying to remain uncaught that was so hilarious to Ryuk, the smaller incidents within it - killing the FBI agents, charming Misora's name from her - Light always regarded them as necessary acts and committed them with the utmost sincerity. He had to kill and so he did. He never regarded being Kira as a game, any of it - except when it came to L. The notes to L were not just a part of his study on how much control he had over his victims and for how long; they were also a tease, a taunt, a delighted call to war.

*( L, do you know... gods of death... love apples? )*

Some things, Light had decided, didn't need to be changed.

He had to concede, sending notes and various 'gifts' to the orphanage in Winchester was not the smartest thing he'd ever done, but then again, much of his genius had been bent to killing on a worldwide scale and evading capture. Perhaps it followed naturally.

He would take every advantage he could get - years of working with far more advanced technology, knowledge of Watari's real identity, L's own admission that he'd spent several years in Britain - and if that meant he could narrow down L's possible locations and discover where L came from and would on occasion return to, so much the better.

He wasn't surprised when L started sending replies back, only amused at the resourcefulness and lateral-mindedness that meant he was told by members of various police forces around the world that L had told them something to pass on to him the next time they worked together, and would the two of them please stop treating them like a glorified messenger service and just exchange e-mails or something and get back to focussing on *solving crimes* ?

He wondered what L had thought about the toffee apples. He'd never said. As to apples and murder... "Ryuk, how many apples do I need for you to go and make sure Nakamura is okay?"

"... don't you have cameras for that?"

"Yes, all over his apartment, just like with my false Kiras. I just want you to leave me alone for a while."

"... Hm. Annoy you, or apples? Bring disgrace to name and function? Or apples?"

Light waited.

"Five."

"Off you go then," Light grinned and closed his eyes in preparation for a few precious minutes of Ryuk-free peace.

Maybe he should send L a wreath on the fifth of November. White roses, in the shape of a gothic L. If only Light could see his face then, he'd love to know what heights of paranoia the bastard would reach next.

---

A/N: I give up. Version Four, in case anyone thought I was deliberately making you all (however many of you that is) wait.

## Chapter 4

Yagami Light sat in his room, eyes blank as he stared out of the window. Unobserved, he was a very still child. Normal people fidgeted, saw the need to look busy, to engage themselves in some important activity, or at least, to appear engaged in some sort of important activity. Light, unlike normal people, didn't feel the need to justify taking up space. Occasionally, space felt the need to justify holding him.

There was a case in Missouri waiting for his attention, several messages from his exclusive, personally hired team of ethically-challenged operatives - currently spying on a businessman by the name of Yamada - and all he could do was glance at the clock every now and then with tired eyes and wonder what the hell Ryuk had been thinking.

He was *bored*, trapped in a child's body, tired of the constant pressure of thousands of lives on his shoulders - lives he still regarded as being better gone - and ground down by the repetitiveness of his interactions with the vast network of people he controlled and had to keep a constant eye on. Incredibly intelligent people, all of them, and they all happily followed his orders without question as he directed them across his palms like tiny chess pieces, their loyalty bought with money, carefully applied understanding and charm, and the trust born of long-association. He was never sure if he was irritated or amused by them.

He wouldn't say that he *despaired* at the task given to him, but he did find himself doubting his capabilities at times. Which, Ryuk would willingly point out, said a hell of a lot more than any admittance Light could make.

Boredom. Ennui. Weltschmerz. There wasn't a proper word for it in any language he supposed. He and Ryuk had spent several hours one day, cycling through every language they knew (and several

languages only Ryuk knew) in an attempt to find the exact word for their situation, and failed. He was, however, very briefly amused by Ryuk's use of a series of garbled grunts and hoarse noises that he claimed was the first human language.

(Ryuk was even more amused by Light's insistence that he teach him ancient Mayan. For no reason other than 'I want to,' and no bribery other than a carefully inflected '... please?' accompanied by the most heart-rending pair of puppy-dog eyes Ryuk had ever had turned against him.

... so even shinigami weren't completely immune to the Light-Charm. Big deal. Ryuk was willing to bet even L would have forgotten about executing Light if he'd been face to face with that look.)

Ryuk had taught Light several languages when he was relearning speech, most of them a little more useful than ancient Mayan.

It wasn't too hard to figure out that Ryuk would have been able to communicate with anyone who picked up his Note, regardless of what language they spoke. His admission that he'd dropped it at random, and that he'd chosen English to write the 'How to Use' rules because it was the most popular of the human languages was a pretty good indication that the difficulty humans had in communicating with each other was a moot point to a shinigami.

Besides, when Light was an infant Ryuk would hover over his cradle, trace arcane patterns on his soft little body and sing the vilest nursery rhymes available in Russian. That had been a pretty big clue.

In the first five years of life children have such a remarkable facility for language they can effortlessly learn two structurally quite different languages simultaneously without the slightest sign of stress or confusion. All children begin babbling in a systematic way, making the same sounds at about the same time, regardless of country or continent, and the semantic and grammatical idiosyncrasies - inflections of tense, use of gender - that distinguish one language

from another are learned last, after the child already has a functioning command of the language.

Ryuk called it cheating. Light preferred to consider it as making the best of an almost untenable position.

*Prod. Prod. Prod .* "... Ryuk, if you don't *stop that* I'm going to put all my considerable intelligence to the matter of how to castrate a shinigami and you are going to be my first victim. Do you doubt that I can do this?" he said, turning away from the window to face him, childish voice high and clear, sweeter than anything Light had a right to be, particularly when issuing threats.

Ryuk reluctantly folded his clawed finger back and sulked.

Light sighed heavily, and quite deliberately turned away from the crouched form of the shinigami in the corner to return to his previous task of staring blindly out of the window. He was no longer quite sure there had really been a time when Ryuk hadn't been there, hovering at his shoulder, and had been quite disturbed to discover that when he was out of his sight for longer than an hour he started to feel exposed and vulnerable. No, disturbed was too weak a word. He'd been horrified. It was even worse than killing L and waking up every morning still expecting to see him staring at him, fiddling at the handcuff on his wrist and musing aloud whether his percentage should go up by two or three points for a nightmare.

He considered his options, remembered how he'd originally died, and decided to build bridges. "Ryuk."

"I liked you better when you were freaking out and getting shot."

"..." On second thought, perhaps Ryuk needed a little alone time. Or as much alone time as you could get, bound to follow a single person for the entirety of their life.

"You're so cruel. You never give me enough apples."

"..." Even Mu might be more preferable to a full lifetime with Ryuk. No wonder he'd been willing to give up his ownership of the Note after a week trapped with only an apple-deprived Ryuk for company.

"You order me around like you're the one in charge-"

"Am I not?" Light said dryly, knowing Ryuk was completely oblivious to him. They'd clearly been around each other far too long if the shinigami had managed to pick up his habit of ranting to himself.... Did that mean he'd picked up Ryuk's habit of contorting himself when puzzled or deprived of entertainment? He cast a quick glance over himself to be sure all limbs were in natural positions.

"Do this and do that, and make sure nobody's following me, and look for cameras and do I get a word of thanks? No. *That's* why you ended up dying a warehouse, shot to death like one of your common criminals, suffocating on your own blood and feeling your heart go *nhk --*"

"Is that a technical term?"

"--in your chest, with that hideous expression on your face and-"

"... I really don't think *you* can talk when it comes to appearance."

"And you've got an ego the size of... the size of... "

"Tokyo?" Light suggested indifferently. "A meteor? A planet? A narcissistic egotistical self-proclaimed god with some serious interpersonal relation problems?" He was pretty sure L had called him that once, halfway through their handcuff phase when they couldn't do anything without stepping on each other's ragged nerves.

The shinigami considered it for a moment before nodding. "Yeah, what you said. Only bigger. You ignore me, and when you do talk you usually end up throwing things at me, and you don't play enough video games with me--"

"Ryuk. Castration. The words go together nicely, don't they?" Light mused.

"... I don't know why I bothered."

"To be honest, Ryuk, I don't know why you did either. Clearly insanity is catching."

There was a tense silence for a moment while Light studied his nails and Ryuk stared at the ceiling. "... You know shinigami don't have sex organs as such?" he said at last.

"... No, Ryuk, and I didn't particularly *want* to know, thanks."

Light tilted his head to one side reflectively in the ensuing silence. Some days the idea of disappearing, of subsuming himself utterly in the role of anonymous detective was difficult to shake. It had its merits, but when his physical appearance was a little more equally matched with his mental age he intended to become a doctor. Sure, he could set up another false identity, but it seemed an unnecessary complication and he would miss (sort of, vaguely) his family. They reminded him he was human.

He had long since noted a distressing tendency in himself to refer to other people as 'humans', to regard them as something entirely separate from himself, sometimes to consider them an utterly different species. He found himself being amused by the most mundane things that would have irritated or horrified him in his previous life - he watched the news, with its depressing, monotonous record of human sin and found himself distantly amused by the sheer idiocy of it. He understood Ryuk's remarks on humanity and laughed at them, he found it more and more difficult to look at people and not laugh, more and more difficult to stop himself from sneering.

No, he needed his family for precisely the same reason he had once cast them aside. Once he had thought he was becoming god, and his family were a human thing, the chrysalis a butterfly left without regret. Now it was the other way round and he wrapped himself in



them to remind him how his first attempt at ascension had turned out.

"... perhaps when I become a doctor I should specialise in cardiology?" he mused aloud for Ryuk's amusement, knowing the shinigami would get the joke, the only being in the world who would any more. It never occurred to him to doubt his intended future. As far as he was concerned, the saying that a person could do anything they put their mind to - it was made for him. Hadn't he proven it over and over, altering lives, politics, even the human consciousness with sheer determination and will? Didn't criminals still fear him, his shadow so heavy and dark it couldn't be erased even by diverting his course before it had begun?

Besides, it wasn't as if he was afraid of blood.

Ryuk brightened perceptively. "You know what would be even funnier than you becoming a cardiologist? Huh? Huh?"

Light gave a slow blink that could mean he was dismissing the subject or indulging it, depending upon the context. Ryuk continued. "If you became a prison doctor!" he doubled over laughing as if it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard... so far anyway.

Light shook his head wearily, lips twitching ineffectually. "I'd have a negligence case against me in days."

"Don't doctors take some sort of oath promising they'll help anyone who needs it? The hypocritical oath or something."

"Hippocratic Oath," Light corrected. He took a glance at Ryuk's gleeful expression out of the corner of his eye. "... don't even think about it, Ryuk."

" *Hyuk hyuk*," Ryuk crooned close to his ear, crouching down and stretching his wings out so that the shadow Light cast across the bedroom wall was of a child with ragged wings.

Both of them, he decided, were so terribly bored.

He looked at the clock. Twenty-five minutes left. He came to a decision. "Come on, Ryuk. We're going to stop a fire." He paused and contemplated the previous statement for a moment. "Actually, scratch that, I'm not too sure if that'll count, so the fire will go ahead as planned. But we're going to save lives anyway."

"... what?"

---

They'd climbed in through the window - or Light had, anyway - before Ryuk finally gave in to curiosity and asked.

"How'd you know to be there?"

Light looked up as he shrugged off his slightly singed t-shirt, wrinkling his nose at the heavy smell of smoke. "... I killed a lot of people, Ryuk."

"... what's that got to do with anything...?"

"My victims were all - okay, *mostly* - people who'd killed other people. I didn't pick them out of a phone book you know."

"No?" Ryuk questioned innocently. Light ignored him.

"I looked up things other than their name and face - like who they killed, how and why, what sentence they were serving... so when it comes to a lot of criminals I know the future. I know their would-be victims. It's an advantage I'm going to make the most of." He smiled grimly as he bundled the smoky clothing up and contemplated whether to fling it in the clothes hamper or the trash. "You can't tell me you didn't expect that of me."

Light had explained the concept of an eidetic memory once, but Ryuk had never really gotten it - a shinigami had no need for such a thing after all - until Light had recited the names of every criminal

he'd ever used to test the Death Note, their crimes, victims, sentences and what he used them to test.

"... guess not." He'd known, of course, that Light had researched all his victims, that he avoided killing some humans who had killed by accident or in extenuating circumstances (Ryuk had always thought it an unusual lapse of diligence, but then, he was a shinigami and Light was a human who thought he had to justify killing other humans) but he hadn't realised Light had given them much thought beyond 'this person killed for malicious purposes. Heart attack.'

He really should have known by now not to underestimate Light's capabilities.

"It counts, doesn't it?" Light demanded, sitting in the chair at his desk and crossing his arms, clearly worried by Ryuk's lack of enthusiasm.

"Yeah... obviously they would have died in that fire... and I saw their lifespans, right before you reached them they were minutes from ending... but..."

"It counts." Light said flatly, spinning the chair around with a foot so he could rest his crossed arms on the desk and glare at his computer instead of at Ryuk. "Therefore we have no problem. End of discussion."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Ryuk said, defeated, unable to articulate quite what he meant. It happened a fair bit around Light. "You're really screwing things up, you know."

Light's response was pretty much what Ryuk expected - a shrug. This was a human who'd decided he had the right to change the world with mass-murder after all. So long as Light himself was safe he really couldn't care less if the rest of the world was flipped upside down and shaken like one of those snow globes. Speaking of secure worlds flipped upside down...

"Hey," he said brightly after a moment. "Does this mean you're gonna do something about Amane?"

Light groaned and slumped forward to bury his head into his arms. "Suppose I'll have to," he mumbled reluctantly. "I mean, if her stalker isn't stopped, Jealous will die for her again and then I'll have to deal with a Death Note being used indiscriminately." He paused. "Wait, *is* Jealous there to save her life? And Rem to bring her the Note?"

"No idea," Ryuk shrugged. "I mean, just about everyone in the Shinigami Realm is watching how this is going down, so obviously they all know the deal with you... hey, did you know, you're killing shinigami now without meaning to? Last three years five of 'em finally ran out of time and they never noticed 'cause they were so busy watching you."

"Interesting, but not an answer to my question."

"Okay, okay. What Jealous did, and Rem... even though it was for one human, their actions had a pretty big impact on the human world. Knock-on effect, or whatever. The King might have brought 'em back to keep things the way they worked before, or to see what you do. He's weird like that."

Light was silent for a long moment. "... We can always hope they're not and she dies," he muttered under his breath.

"Aren't you here to learn some compassion?"

Light lifted his head to give him with a coolly incredulous stare. "Are you, a *shinigami* - a shinigami who encouraged me in wholesale killing, no less - chiding me for a lack of humanity?"

"I never really considered you a human like the rest of them," Ryuk mused as he picked up an apple from the bowl on Light's desk and started gnawing. "I always thought there'd been some mix-up and that you were really a shinigami who ended up in a human body by mistake."

"... is that a compliment?"

"Maybe."

"That's-- Well. Thank you, Ryuk. Although if you start flirting with me you can say goodbye to your apples."

Ryuk nearly dropped his apple core in shock. "I wasn't flirting," he sputtered, making the word 'flirting' sound like the weirdest and most inane activity he knew of. Which was probably a correct summation of Ryuk's thoughts on human dating rituals anyway.

"Yeah, I know," Light said tranquilly, as if he hadn't just suggested something that would have any other human (and any other shinigami) horrified. "I've taught you far better than that, I hope."

"Yeah," Ryuk snorted. He chuckled slightly at the thought of Light's many dates before Amate, when Light would explain the how and why behind using a girl to throw suspicion off. "It's all about the good looks and trustworthy smile."

" *You're not popular with the ladies, Ryuk?* "

Light flashed him his most charmingly devious grin (or maybe that was deviously charming, Ryuk was never quite sure) and leaned back in his chair like a reclining king. "That's right," he purred, pretending to buff his nails.

"Arrogance, arrogance," Ryuk mock-sighed, shaking his head.

"Confidence, confidence," Light retorted, putting a hand out and spreading the fingers as if to judge if his polishing had had any great effect on what was already perfection.

"Arrogance," Ryuk said firmly. "You are an arrogant, conceited human bastard. That's why I like you."

"And you are a lazy, irritating - and quite possibly bipolar - shinigami. That's why I put up with you."

"... I'm a god of *death*, you know."

Light blinked and ran his coolly assessing gaze from the bottom of Ryuk's heeled boots to the top of his spiky-haired head. "I'm hardly likely to forget, Ryuk," he said dryly, eyebrow raised.

"Yeah well, show some respect. You know I could kill you."

Light snorted disdainfully. "No you couldn't. You'd be bored out of your mind. You did all this-" he spread his arms out to indicate his current state of existence in the human world, "to avoid that terrible possibility."

Too damn sharp for his own good, that was Light's problem. Just because Ryuk had broken several major rules for the sake of his entertainment. Several major, *major* rules... but that still didn't mean Light had the right to mock him like there would be no consequences.

... damn Yagami Light and his irritatingly perceptive mind.

Light grinned, secure in the knowledge that he had yet again reduced a god of death to pouting with mere words. Murder cases got boring. Finding new ways to irritate Ryuk never did. "Apple, Ryuk?" he offered conciliatorily. "Better than alcohol and considerably cheaper than crack."

With a sales pitch like that, Ryuk lasted twenty seconds before he snatched the apple and crammed it down his throat. "... Don't take this the wrong way, Light, but I really hope you lose."

What would he do for the rest of eternity without Light around to think up things to entertain him with? Even the King was betting on the outcome of this. That was to say nothing of the various and sundry bets going on over just about everything else that might happen, from the likelihood of crossing paths with L Lawliet once more to the possible number of humans Kira could save before failing to whether or not he would ever snap and punch Misa (because Light could

hardly afford to skip out on saving a life just because he didn't like the individual).

"Thanks, Ryuk," Light said wryly. "It's always nice to know I can rely on you."

Personally, Ryuk had two Death Notes waiting on Light and L's meeting. He knew them both after all, and he knew better than anyone Light was... unbalanced without L. Not to say he believed in Light's 'Fate', 'Destiny' or whatever, but... it just had to happen. Even if Ryuk had go on a killing spree to make it happen. No rules against that. He was bound to Yagami Light and if he killed a few humans - well, Ryuk was one of the few death gods left who'd actually worked in the last five centuries or so, but he still had to extend his lifespan some time, and if those few human deaths happened to intrigue a certain detective, that was entirely accidental.

He'd killed for Light once before, slipping through loopholes illuminated by years watching Kira at his murderous best. If Light was in a similar position again - which was likely, if he persisted in this preventing already happened murders thing - he would kill again. And L was a sharp guy; he'd be pretty damn quick to pick up on a pattern, irregular and supposedly unconnected as it might appear.

Yes. Completely and utterly coincidental.

Sometimes he even surprised himself with what he'd learned from Light.

---

L stared at the slightly wilted floral wreath Watari had finally been convinced into bringing him. "This arrived on the fifth, you say?"

Seeing no point in denying it, Watari nodded.

L reached out and touched one of the roses, the browning petals falling at the slight touch. "... He's late," was all he said.

Watari continued to stare worriedly at L as the silence began to get uncomfortably long.

"... I didn't think we were *that* much at odds."

"Kira disagrees, it would seem." Not one to let an opportunity pass, Watari quickly added, "Perhaps if you were to be less... fervent in your attempts to find him?"

L tore his eyes away from the wreath at last. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said firmly.

Watari shook his head despairingly. "L, please."

L turned his gaze back to the wreath. He'd taken a week off his current case to be at the orphanage for Halloween, just in case, and he wouldn't admit to anyone he'd been disappointed when no sly message or gift arrived on the 31st. He tried to construct a suitable reply for Kira that didn't involve the admission that he had no idea of the intentions behind this 'present'. It wasn't the first time he'd been left bewildered by Kira's actions. There had been several occasions when he felt certain Kira was remarking upon a private joke that he should know and just didn't, like the toffee apples and the bizarre note about the eating habits of death gods.

Death gods. Apples. Floral wreaths.

" *How'd the job go, Aiber?*"

" *There's a judge out there who would no doubt love to sentence me for that one.*"

Judge. Heart-stopper.

His mind went back to one of Kira's more recent cases, the investigation of a child prostitution ring, and a certain Takahashi Noboru, thirty-six years old and found dead of a heart attack in a



state that would suggest he hadn't been alone at the time.  
Coincidence, maybe?

He sighed. Riddles wrapped in mysteries, that was Kira. And underneath all those layers waited an answer worth his time. He couldn't wait to unravel all of them.

"We should spend more on security." He said.

Watari sighed. "Perhaps he is merely telling you to be more careful or he'll putting this on your grave very soon," he suggested, without much hope his theory would be accepted.

L contemplated the thought for a moment, before returning to the more pressing consideration of what to reply with. "Perhaps we should arrange for Takeshi to take a wreath back?" he mused aloud. "Let Kira read into that what he will."

Watari wished he knew who Kira was. It had just occurred to him that he really needed more practise with his sniper rifle.

## Chapter 5

When Sayu woke up in the middle of the night, Light was still awake. She thought she could hear his voice, soft and indistinct behind their shared bedroom wall. She tugged her blanket around her and padded into the hall, her toy rabbit swinging by its ears in her hand. She paused outside his door and listened to his muted voice as he talked in some weird language that was all 'v's and 'w's and garbled throat noises. Recognising a phrase that meant he was finished with the conversation, she knocked.

He said several bad words (although most of them weren't Japanese, so she just assumed they were bad words) but unlocked the door and let her in anyway. "Bad dream?" he asked rhetorically as he turned back to the computer and glared balefully at the spreadsheets filling the screen.

She nodded. Light knew how to deal with nightmares. Light kept all the dark things away, and he could be scarier than any funny shadows anyway. He sighed quietly as he sat down again and pulled her gently into his lap. "Want a story?"

She nodded again, and silently offered to share the blanket. He looked tired and worn, and she didn't think he could deal with her talking right now - he always said she was too noisy and happy after he'd been shouting at his computer. He snorted slightly and let her arrange it around them both with a weary kind of patience.

It was times like these that Sayu forgot Light was only three years older than her. There was this funny thing about the shadows in Light's room, especially at night, which made him look weird. Old-eyed sort of weird, and kind of scary.

But he was her brother, so he was scary *for* her, so that was okay.

"Once upon a time--" Light began.

"No!" Sayu said firmly before she could stop herself. Light rolled his eyes at someone over her head and sighed.

"No?" he said curiously.

"That isn't how it starts!"

"Every good story starts with 'once upon a time!'" Light protested, stretching an arm around her to tap out a short command on the keyboard.

She considered the thought for a moment, then shook her head decisively. "Not this one."

"Okay, so how does this one start?" he encouraged.

She made a face and shivered slightly so that he wrapped the blanket tighter around the two of them. "Dunno," she protested, huddling close (not the wisest of moves, given the precarious balance he was trying to keep, seated on a computer chair made for one and supporting another person on his lap). "It's your story."

He tilted his head slightly to one side as if listening to something. Maybe Ryuk was talking. She wished Light would tell her stories about Ryuk again, but he pretended not to know what she meant any more when she asked about him. His eyebrows rose in disbelief at whatever he heard and he said in the funny voice people did when they were quoting and didn't want to look like they believed what they were saying, "There once was a god named Kira, who was beautiful and full of pride."

"Like the detective?" This sounded much more interesting than some silly story about princesses and dragons. Light always seemed to forget she hated those. Unless maybe he did it because he liked to hear her whine throughout and complain that the princesses never did anything interesting?

He had to be talking to Ryuk, because Ryuk talked all funny, just like what Light had just said, and Light always grinned a little when he spoke for him. Sayu wished she had an invisible friend like her brother's friendly something-or-other (she'd forgotten the word Light had used once when she was very, very small), but Light needed Ryuk more than she did; she had friends at school and stuff, and Light was stuck with all those angry voices over the computer and Ryuk. And while Ryuk had sounded very funny in the stories Light had told her, she thought he must get very tiring for someone who was around him all the time.

Light shrugged slightly. "In name."

"Kay," she said, and nodded her approval of Ryuk's opening gambit. "What sort of god was he?"

Light stiffened slightly, she felt it, and he stared very intently at the empty space by the apple bowl. "Just a god," He said after a moment, refusing to answer. "And he grew more prideful day by day because gods are only as strong as they are worshipped, and Kira was given all he ever desired. He was a spoilt brat," he added, and prodded her gently to remind her of all the times he bought her little candies and grumbled that she was spoilt, spoilt, spoilt and was going to turn out badly and he really ought to save her from temptation and eat the things himself.

It never worked. Light hated sweet things.

He sounded a little weird, mocking, sort of, but she ignored that because he was also stroking her hair and he only did that when he was deep in thought and forgot she wasn't a baby any more and didn't need the comfort.

She missed Light. He hadn't *talked* talked to her in ages, months and months. He was at family meals and stuff, but that was different, he was different there. This was Light, the one who spoke in foreign languages late at night and had three different cellphones their parents didn't know about that were much smaller and sleeker than

the ones she saw in the street, and told her stories about an invisible person named Ryuk who thought people were funny and was funny himself. This Light was all hers, not like the smiley one that showed up outside the house, or the polite one their parents knew.

It occurred to Sayu for a brief blinding moment that maybe there was some problem there, but Light had always been - what was the word? Triple-faced? Light was masks and *masks*, but maybe all big brothers were like that. Only not, because Light was *her* big brother, and of course he was special and different to all those other boys. Ugly smelly things, and just what was so fascinating about pulling hair anyway? They should just grow their own hair long if they wanted to pull it and stop bothering girls just because they were smart enough to think of it first.

"Then one day, a death god dropped the book that gave him power over human deaths, and Kira picked it up..."

"Ryuk!" Sayu said brightly, on the half-chance that she was right.

"... That's right," Light nodded, and hugged her, and made a soft sort of noise, a kind of gulping *huh* noise, like the one mom made before she started crying that one time. It was even scarier when Light did it, because Light didn't cry for anything and she thought if he did the world might stop turning or something.

"Kira decided that since nobody else seemed to be doing anything about it, he'd start judging the humans, and he'd - get rid of the ones who did bad things. But there was another god, who called himself Ryuzaki but really meant Justice, and he disagreed with what Kira was doing, and that's how a war started..."

When Sachiko came looking for Sayu early in the morning, she was asleep, head lolling gently on her brother's shoulder as his even voice continued to tell of the battle between a god of death and a god of intellectual inquiry as he typed one-handed at the computer.

Light didn't move when she took Sayu away, didn't even turn to look as she called a sleepy goodbye. He wondered when he'd stopped loving her, when his little sister's life had become nothing more than another piece in the game between himself and L's successors. He wondered if he cared even now, even after she'd sat in his lap and he'd told her stories about a life that never was.

He decided to stop thinking about it.

His eyes drifted back to the bowl beside the computer. They were out of apples again. Now *there* was a problem he could deal with.

---

The morning after Sayu had woken from her nightmare convinced the shadows in her room had gained sharp teeth and spindly limbs, Soichiro was staring at a newly delivered floral wreath and wondering if avoiding home (avoiding his son) was worth it.

He was a weekend father at best. He knew his wife thought he was too attached to his job, but tried her best to understand its necessity and not blame him for it. If she were less understanding, he thought, he might not feel guilty about it. It wasn't his job, his morals or his desire to see justice done that kept him away from home.

Light had been tiny when he first noticed it. The faint shiver he felt when his shining son would blink at him with vague eyes, when he watched his boy babble to himself. He knew Sachiko had felt it too, knew it from the way she'd held herself as she stood watching over their son, from the way she would stare blindly at the ceiling long into the night.

Sachiko was the one who had time for the gods. He did not. He saw too much of the ugliness of human nature, found himself tied to it long after his working day was finished; he found it hard to see the divine nature of anything any more. Sachiko had spoken of Amaterasu-omikami when she named Light, of the sun and the moon and the light shared between them, and sometimes he could see it but most of the time he simply thought of how bright his boy

was, how quick and clever, what a wonderful detective he would make. He had no time for flights of fancy.

But Light would smile like Yukinko, like a child made of snow and ice, and the itch between his shoulder blades and the unease that filled his throat and stopped him speaking grew stronger and harder to ignore the older Light got, especially when he looked at Sayu, sweet little Sayu who was so unlike her brother, so- normal. Sayu threw tantrums, scrawled childish pictures (sometimes on the walls) chattered like a bird and smiled with childish sincerity.

Next to her it was easy to see Light was different, so dark and distant it grew harder and harder to keep convincing himself that it was normal; he stayed away more and more often, letting distance and time twist his glimpses of Light into something more benign.

It was unnerving to look at your son and realise he was probably smarter than you would ever be. No doubt all the parents of geniuses looked at their children like he did, sometimes wondered where on earth (or who in heaven) this child had come from. No doubt all such parents sometimes felt intimidated by their child's gaze, felt that it judged and found them wanting.

There was nothing so very different about Light. Well, Light was different to other children his age, of course, but that was only his obvious intelligence. Light was normal within the slim parameters of his type of genius. There were children - somewhere - just like him, just as frighteningly intelligent and with the same coolly evaluating eyes. There had to be, where else would people like L and Eraldo Coil come from?

So there was no need to start thinking of Light as some sort of - oddity, some sort of *monster* . He dealt with monsters all the time in his job and they were nothing - nothing like Light. It was just - just -

He was proud of his son, of course. His son, so bright, so blessed, who always brought home perfect test papers, despite his teachers' concerned remarks about his apparent inability to maintain

concentration for longer than five minutes. Light, who used to greet him when he came home from work with Sayu's hand firmly clasped in his own as he let her tug him around the house, who'd watched her like a hawk as she toddled, always ready to jump forward and catch her if she fell.

Yes, he was proud, he was very proud, what father wouldn't be? But still. Something in his eyes, something in his smile.

When he took days off with his family, he noticed that although Sachiko was as serene and unflappable as ever, Sayu - too young to be well-versed in deceit - was always a little surprised by Light's presence. He wondered briefly what his son's normal interaction with his family was, but dismissed it as going a little too close to his early musings on Light's ineffability. Light was rarely visible when he was home normally, but he often finished late and on particularly bad cases he only went home to shower and sleep. There was nothing odd about Light's absence.

There was however, something odd about his sleeping habits. Even he couldn't fail to notice that the light beneath his son's door - always locked - rarely went out. And he talked almost throughout the night, audible only if you stood right next to the door and listened hard. He spoke in quiet measured tones, often pausing for long periods as if someone was replying. He was probably talking on his phone of course, except that he would stop if he heard someone outside his door, and what was the point in that? Why did he feel the need to do that unless there was something wrong about it?

He shook his head grimly, and decided he was going to stop thinking about his son. He was going to stop thinking about his first breakfast with his family in awhile, and the way Sachiko had reacted to Light, becoming watchful and attentive. He was going to stop thinking about how when he looked into the eyes of hardened criminals he started to find himself thinking of Light, and Light's far-away eyes.

He looked at the wreath on his desk again and made an indignant noise in the back of his throat. He had no idea what it was about,



and suspected he didn't want to know, but he was curious, naturally.

What were these flowers again? Tiger lilies? There was some meaning here he was missing. Not that that was very surprising; he didn't know what had started the exchange, and he most likely he wouldn't know the response either. L could leave a message with the French, receive a reply from the FBI, give his answer to the Chinese and get one back from Italy. The only time the resentful messenger service had ever managed to work out even half the conversation was one notable Interpol meeting when they'd spent three hours working out the likely order of the last six months of conversation between L and Kira. It had required the hefty services of a dozen translators, three special services cryptographers, the drawing up of several charts and long arguments over the likely order of responses. In the end, all they'd really managed to discover was that the time probably would have been better spent on following the original meeting plan.

But. Police will be police. His eyes went back to the flowers spelling out Kira in vibrant red-orange. He had a sudden glimpse of his son's serious little face, and cursed himself for it.

"Chief?"

"Hm?" He looked up. Aizawa - good policeman, good skills, ought to go far one day - was smiling, though it faded a little with Soichiro's lacking response. "Ah, yes, of course," he said hastily. "Just-" he indicated the flowers with one hand. Aizawa followed his movement and snorted slightly in understanding.

"God, those two piss me off," he muttered, irritation getting the better of his sense of discretion.

Soichiro chuckled before he could stop himself, and Aizawa flushed. "I dare say there are a lot of policemen out there that agree with you," he said, and didn't add that at times he was one of them.

More confident now that he'd been given tacit permission to continue, Aizawa picked up the wreath and shook it slightly. "I mean, jeeze, what the hell is with this? No, never mind that, it's just plain what the hell with those two."

Soichiro nodded to show he understood where he was coming from. Sooner or later, even if you had no real contact with them, if you were a policeman of any type L and Kira managed to rub you raw. It hadn't been so bad when it was just L, who had only rarely worked with Japan anyway. But with two of them, and so obviously obsessed with each other, it was just plain irritating, particularly when you worked with them - or their go-betweens at least - and realised they really were as brilliant as their reputations would have you believe.

L was brilliant, solved cases that had the self-esteem of the national police hitting the ground with a despairing scream and disintegrating in an explosion of flaming shards - and then he asked them to pass on a message for Kira, and there was always the sneaking suspicion that the message was what L had put more thought to.

"Damn," Aizawa muttered, flinging the flowers back down with a scowl. "Should just tell 'em we refuse to play messenger any more. I mean, we're police officers, not a damn courier service."

"I have considered it," Soichiro admitted with a wry smile. "But I have the suspicion our superiors wouldn't like it, and who knows, perhaps they'd refuse to work on any more cases with us."

"L might, arrogant bastard." Aizawa said thoughtfully. "But Kira- I don't think he could."

Soichiro nodded. "He's got more the mindset of a policeman, sees it as a duty. I don't know about L - who does - but he only takes cases that interest him."

"That's another thing," Aizawa pointed out. "That sort of genius, and he refuses to use it unless he gets entertainment out of it? That's just

- just a *waste* . It's sickening! Think of all those bastards who go free because their crimes weren't *interesting* enough for him."

Soichiro nodded sympathetically, and took a sip of his coffee before realising it was stone cold. He grimaced as he put it back down and sighed tiredly. "Any sign of Takeshi?" It might be Masato who turned up, but it was habit to refer to both as Takeshi. It saved time and effort, and it wasn't as if Kira had seen fit to make sure they were capable of distinguishing the two.

Of course, it was entirely possible that neither would appear, but they always seemed to know when the NPA wanted them, and whenever L had sent some random item.

"Sorry boss, but no." His gaze went back to the orange flowers. "Should just burn it." He suggested under his breath. Soichiro pretended not to hear him and Aizawa pretended he hadn't said anything.

Flowers. If they hadn't been in their - rather ominous - shape, he'd probably join in the joking conversations about how at least one of them had finally realised what all the obsessing was about. He chuckled under his breath, trying to imagine faceless Kira receiving a bouquet of lilies. Or computerised L mooning over each short message from Kira. The unintentional hilarity the two could inspire with their single-minded dance was almost worth the aggravation of dealing with them.

"Yagami Soichiro."

He looked up and blinked once, startled. "How the hell did you know L had sent something?" he demanded before he could stop himself.

The man shrugged. "Kira has his ways," he said simply, and held out a hand for the flowers. Soichiro sighed heavily at the thought of yet another station-wide background check to try and find spies and handed the decoration over.

"8:30 this morning," he added, anticipating the question before it was asked. "Anonymously paid for and delivered."

"To be expected," Takeshi shrugged, and studied it for a moment. "The response should be interesting," he murmured after a moment, before nodding sharply and walking out.

Soichiro wandered over to the coffee machine to contribute to the gossip before the real work of the day began. It was impossible to avoid Kira, so there might as well be entertainment found in discussing him.

---

"I don't care what you do with it, burn it, trash it, put it at a shrine, just *get rid of it*," Light said firmly.

Ryuk blinked, shrugged once and picked up the flowery Kira before flying out the window.

Light watched until he was no longer visible (which was very soon, given that it was dark, and Ryuk wore black) before turning away. So. L knew he was in Japan. Not much he could have done about that. He didn't mind L knowing it either. It would have been preferable, of course, if he had been able to convince him he was in some other country, but he was content enough. All L had done was narrow his potential position down to a country of approximately 127,287,000 people.

He knew he was in Kanto. Again, a reasonable assumption, and not a big concern given the densely populated nature of the region. But... the fact that he knew to send such transient gifts as flowers to Tokyo, and the NPA office in particular, knowing he'd get them in time... that was worrying.

It might have been a logical continuation of previous assumptions - from Japan to Kanto to Tokyo. And it wasn't as if--

He noted distantly that his body was tense, and realised Ryuk had to have been gone for an hour. He took several deep breaths, closed his eyes and deliberately tried to relax.

It wasn't as if, even if L was in Tokyo - was he in Tokyo? Light didn't think so, but L liked to know things were going exactly the way he wished, he might have decided to order the flowers in person - he could find him.

Tokyo. 35 41 N, 139 45 E. Twenty-three municipalities with a population of an estimated 12 million - no wait, wasn't that the 2009 estimate?

The chances of running into L - or L running into him - were minute. And while Light knew who to look for, L had no idea. There was no -

"Hey."

Light turned to look at Ryuk, floating through the closed window. "What did you do?"

Ryuk floated over to look him in the face. He had a disconcerting habit of doing that. Light thought it might have developed when he was a baby; Ryuk had liked to look into his eyes as if to make sure Light/Kira was really in there. "Scattered 'em all over Tokyo," he said proudly.

Light wondered briefly if Ryuk wanted an apple. He then amused himself with the mental image of Ryuk flying above central Tokyo flinging flowers in the air like confetti.

"Now, gonna tell me what that was about?"

Light glared at him. "Nothing, Ryuk."

The shinigami snorted, and waited patiently. Light stubbornly refused to open his mouth.

It wasn't as if he didn't know this L and his L - for lack of a better term - weren't the same. He knew that. But - while he could certainly see his L responding to his wreath the way this one had, he knew he would have deliberately arranged for it to arrive a date significant to Light personally, a double - no, triple response, given the tiger lilies. Looking at the flowers chiding him against pride, for the first time Light had found himself truly *missing* L.

He thought of L's grave, what he'd thought as he'd watched his enemy's secret funeral - *Game Over. But it was good while it lasted, wouldn't you agree?* He thought of L's dark eyes, trying to peel him apart, and he thought of the conversations that were dances and duels in the same moment, with at least one partner trying to pretend they were unaware of all the traps as they avoided them.

It was stupid. L was L. There was no difference, really, between this L and the one Light had known. Except there was, the difference was in Kira and L's relation to him, and sometimes - only *sometimes* - Light missed him, the L that knew Kira was murderer.

Ryuk gave up the staring match after two hours, and Light curled into his blankets and told himself it was nothing, a momentary hiccup in sanity. By the time he ate breakfast it was.

---

"Light, keep an eye on Sayu!"

Light rolled his eyes at his mother and held up his right arm to show Sayu's hand held loosely in his own. "She's not going anywhere, I promise."

Sayu pouted ridiculously. "I'm not a baby," she sulked. "I don't need to hold Light's hand to cross the street!"

"Sayu," Soichiro said patiently, "it's just to make sure you're safe, that's all. Light will let go when you're safely across, won't you Light?"

Light nodded gravely, and when his back was turned, stuck his tongue at his little sister. They continued to make faces at each other and were in the park before Sayu remembered to snatch her hand away.

He couldn't remember the last family trip anywhere. Whenever they acted as a family, it unnerved him, and the knowledge that he was unnerved disappointed him. Still, he needed a break, and if the chance to be an immature brat for a few hours was offered, he might as well take it.

"Look, Light!" Sayu said happily, running back up to him and presenting a slightly tattered tiger lily.

"Been raining flowers, has it?" he said, taking it from her and spinning it between his fingers. In the grey November day it looked even brighter than it had in the light of his room. She grinned and ran to catch up with their parents. Light shook his head. "All over Tokyo, Ryuk?" he said, disappointed.

He paused when Ryuk didn't answer, and turned to look at him. He looked unusually focussed, and Light followed his gaze.

He felt something tighten and loosen in his chest at the sight of messy black hair and curled figure; the abrupt removal of a heavy ache he hadn't been aware he was carrying around. The lily fell from suddenly nerveless fingers as he froze, oblivious to everything around him as he watched L stare at his flexing toes.

Then he turned around and walked away.

---

Behind him, L hopped off the bench, slouched over to the fallen flower and picked it up. He glanced thoughtfully from the lily to the family walking away.

It could be coincidence. It could be nothing. But still, the flower was out of season and the likelihood of crossing paths with someone

holding one was small...

"Watari," he said when the elder man stopped at his shoulder. "Get me everything you can on Yagami Soichiro and his family."



## Chapter 6

L spoke in percentages and probabilities to the police forces he worked with because he knew they preferred them, liked having statistics and corroborating data to assure them of their decisions and chances of success. To L, although he made sure to provide them and ascertain their validity, they were necessary masks for what was really important.

It was generally assumed that the quality of a decision was directly related to the time and effort taken to make it. When doctors were faced with a difficult diagnosis they ordered more tests, when the patient was uncertain of what they heard, they asked for a second opinion. The most oft-repeated homilies were those about the advantages of thinking things through - *haste makes waste. Look before you leap. Stop and think* . The police naturally felt that gathering as much information and spending as much time in deliberation as possible was always better.

While he accepted that in some cases it was better to judge every possible angle before moving, more often than not what he relied on was his instinct, honed over the years into the finest of instruments.

L could judge a person and form accurate opinions regarding their character merely from the way they introduced themselves. He could evaluate and react to new situations within a case equally rapidly, and a feeling for the circumstances developed case-by-case meant his decision on whether or not to follow that first response was rarely the wrong one.

So while L noted the appearance of three other tiger lilies while he walked back to his hotel and automatically graded the probabilities regarding Kira's involvement, instinct said nothing could be gained from them or the people occasionally picking them up or throwing them down.

Instinct said the puzzle piece he desired had fallen into his lap in the park when the Yagami boy had dropped an out of season flower at his feet.

He hadn't been pleased - to put it mildly - when Watari had insisted he go outside for some 'fresh air', citing the possibility of a Vitamin D deficiency and carefully avoiding any mention of a need for a break from cursing Kira. He had in fact been sulking when the bright orange flower had tumbled into view and made a bad day infinitely better.

Fortunately, it had proven unnecessary to scour all the school databases.

L remembered Yagami Soichiro. L remembered everybody. It had taken him less than three minutes to dismiss him as a potential Kira. It wasn't that Yagami was unintelligent. He was a smart man. Just not enough. As L recalled from the few times he'd worked with him, he was a sober, determined man, a good police officer and one that would go far, but more from sheer bloody-minded determination than brilliance.

Conservative and methodical in his job, Yagami was not given to sudden leaps of insight or prone to thinking outside the box. When talking to L, he was vocal with his opinions and often responded instinctively when L finished theorising, without the careful consideration L would expect from Kira. Not to mention he was a highly placed and visible member of the NPA and devoted to his job, with very little spare time, which put the likelihood of him being a detective mastermind down to none.

His wife on the other hand, was a housewife with plenty of spare time. L considered her carefully, flicking impatiently through the pages on her childhood, records of school attendance and achievements, medical reports and other miscellany. Yagami Sachiko, thirty-five years old, married for fourteen years, mother of two children aged eleven and eight. A full-time housewife, graduated with a business degree and a degree in English - he had his

suspicious about which parent had named the son - and she was not, according to the marks she received at school, particularly creative or quick-minded. But then, L had been accused by exasperated orphanage officials of being retarded plenty of times, and not to put too fine a point on it, being the best detective in the world required a brain firing on all cylinders.

Even if to the uninformed they sometimes appeared to be misfiring.

He shuffled through the papers until he found her picture. She was smiling in the photo, the deep grooves at the corners of her eyes clearly visible. There was a trace left of the beauty she had possessed aged twenty-one on her wedding day but mostly her face would be considered pleasant. She looked like the mother she was, a little worn, perhaps, but content with her life. He would consider her further for ways to access the family, if such a course proved necessary, but for now he had no interest in her.

The daughter L dismissed instantly. Intelligence was not something that could be consciously hidden at her age (although L had failed his first IQ test by falling asleep out of sheer boredom) and he'd looked through her records. She had tried her best to please her testers and had scored above average but nowhere near the level required.

But the boy... Light... he was very interesting, just as L had anticipated he would be.

His school reports indicated that he'd never gotten a grade under a hundred percent, and yet there were countless concerned remarks by his teachers about his lack of concentration. He had even, according to his English teacher, fallen asleep in the middle of one test, woken up before he could be reprimanded and still finished before the other students.

Clearly his academic career was not something he put much thought to, his success indicative of a brilliant mind on autopilot. And if he

was that good on automatic, the thought of what he could do or be if he put all his focus to something was breathtaking.

(Kira...?)

He had trouble interacting with other children his age, but there was no doubt that he was capable of it when he desired to be, instances being carefully noted by relieved teachers.

Yagami's first Japanese teacher had a breakdown two months after he joined the class. The psychiatrist the class had been forced to visit to ensure there was no lasting psychological damage from watching their teacher try to throw herself out of a window had quit after his session.

It was never explicitly or even implicitly stated that Yagami was responsible or in any way connected the mysteriously high turnover of school staff, but it was a fact that his teachers were of the consensus that he was slightly unsettling. Too intelligent for his age was the typical remark, though how you could be 'too intelligent' L wasn't entirely sure. It was a curious use of adverb; the standard response to the type of children Watari sought and nurtured was 'intelligent for his/her age', or, very rarely, 'exceptionally intelligent'. Never 'too intelligent', as if even genius had age-restricted boundaries that shouldn't be surpassed.

He flipped back through the pages and looked at the photograph provided. The first time he'd seen it he'd received an uncomfortable jolt of - *something*, momentary and painful, but he'd quickly lost it in the deluge of information he'd sorted through moments later.

Formal photographs tended to make everyone look like a criminal, but L didn't think the harshness to Yagami's face was solely the responsibility of the camera and setting. He would be twelve in a few months, and his eyes seemed dark and misplaced in his rounded face.

"Do you have secrets, Yagami Light?" he mused aloud, placing a slender finger over the boy's unsmiling mouth. "Eyes like that, you must do..."

Was one of those secrets Kira? Even if it wasn't, the boy looked like a puzzle worth the time. Undoubtedly Wammy House material, at any rate. He needed a closer look at this (new?) mystery.

---

After four days, Light decided that his policy of ignoring L's presence outside his school just wasn't going to work. With Ryuk's wheedling filling his ears, he steeled himself (not that he would admit that) and one grey afternoon deviated from custom and stopped in front of L.

L looked as weird and ageless as ever. Perhaps his face was a little less angular, the veins in his hands less prominent, and the circles beneath his eyes a little lighter... not that Light had paid such attention to L he could still categorise how much L had slept in the last three months by the bags under his eyes. Really.

How the hell was he supposed to get rid of him without providing anything that might lead L to start thinking he was Kira? When L decided something he set out to prove it. A one percent chance he was a mass-murderer and look at the tricks L had pulled.

He shouldn't look at L. He shouldn't talk to L. He shouldn't give any signal that L's existence was acknowledged, or worse, something to be concerned about.

He stared. L stared back, equally impassive. So it was going to be like that, was it? Well, Ryuk alone knew what a bad idea it was to give Light control of the conversation...

"Pervert," Light said.

L's eyes widened minutely (funny how Light hadn't forgotten how to tell). "Excuse me?"

"Pervert," Light repeated patiently. He suspected it might be a good idea to try and remove the sly grin from his face and proceeded to do so. Misa had really been on to something. Maybe the whole mindfuck to the death thing could have been avoided with just a little stress-relieving name-calling.

"How did you reach that conclusion?"

What is it really possible that such social ineptitude existed? He hadn't been exaggerating L's characteristics out of misplaced nostalgia? He looked at L and decided it was entirely possible. The best response would be to explain simply and without unnecessary complication. Too complicated and L might pretend confusion, and Light might get drawn into one of those intellectual back and forth conversations that were fine between a seventeen year old murderer and the world's best detective, but not between a near twelve year old and a possible stalker. On the other hand, intellectual conversation was the sole redeeming grace of dealing with L in person...

"You've been sitting outside my school for four days, you stare at me like I'm some sort of drug that you haven't had in a week, and I'm pretty sure you follow me home. You're either a pervert or a stalker. Or both." He set his bag down on the ground and rummaged through it for the one thing left uneaten at lunch. "Would you like a cookie, Stalker-san?"

From the look on his face, L was doing what Light had often done to him, and seriously doubting his sanity. "You're offering confectionary to a pervert and stalker, as you insist on calling me?"

"Everyone says you're not to take candy from strangers," Light explained, blinking guilelessly. *Harmless, harmless, absolutely nothing to concern yourself with here...* Behind him, Ryuk indulged in a bout of laughter only possible without the restrictions of breathing. "The implication being bad things will happen. So I figure there's something in the candy, and if I reverse the situation I'm the

one with the power." He made to put the cookie back in the bag. "But if you don't want it..."

L's hand shot out. "I never said I wasn't accepting it."

Light watched him eat it with a familiar expression of amused disgust, realised what he was doing when Ryuk nudged him, and quickly wiped the expression away. "If you were thinking of kidnapping me, my dad's a police chief. It would be a very bad idea."

He wondered for a moment if he'd pushed the naivety a bit too far, but L only shook his head with a smile that Light only knew was there because he'd spent so long chained to the man. Which was something that had never happened, so he really should stop thinking about it just in case L noticed something in his behaviour or expression that gave him away. Sneaky observant bastard, always reading into things that weren't there.

There was a long pause. Light was content to listen to Ryuk's excited rambling, but L looked irritated at his refusal to offer further interaction and was clearly struggling to remember what people asked when no one involved was a suspected felon.

"How old are you?"

Obviously that wasn't it.

"Shouldn't you know that already? You're not a very good stalker," Light complained, knowing full well that L probably knew not just his age, but also his blood type, height, weight, date and time of birth, the attending obstetrician, and what the weather was like at the exact moment his umbilical cord was cut. "I really think you should try something else, Stalker-san."

"I am not a stalker."

Light snorted. "Okay. Pervert-san then."

"I'm not a pervert either."

"You're sitting outside a school and staring at little kids," Light said patiently. "I don't think there's any other explanation for that."

"All the same," L said, and Light watched him shift slightly in his bizarre crouch and brush away the cookie crumbs. After a moment's pause he said, "My name is Ryuzaki."

Light studied the sky with exaggerated interest. "Well, I see no flying pigs so I guess I'm just going to have to ignore that."

L gritted his teeth, Light could actually *hear* him doing it. Revenge was so sweet, and it was even sweeter being able to witness it. He no longer cared if it had been a good idea to talk to L or not, only that it was a fun one.

Dear god, what had Ryuk done to him?

"Why would you think it wasn't my name, Yagami- *chan* ?"

... Bastard. No wonder Light had killed him.

It would not do to scowl, frown or give any outward sign that L had managed to hit a nerve, however small... "Let's forget for now that you shouldn't know my name, I-am-so-not-a-stalker," he said acidly, and was rewarded with a blink and minute shift in L's body language that to his trained eye meant L was mortified at giving himself away. Light smirked before he could stop himself. "It's not your name because what kind of stalker gives his victim his real name?"

"Five more minutes and I bet you he starts hitting his head on something," Ryuk muttered in his ear. Light made a tiny gesture behind his back with his thumb and forefinger to indicate he refused the bet. L would never let anything affect him so badly. Perhaps he threw chocolates at the wall or something when he was truly stressed, but Light had never been lucky enough to witness it.



"I don't suppose it would do much good to protest once again that you're working on assumptions that are false?"

Light shook his head mutely and bit back on a grin. Only L would talk to an eleven year old like that. He wondered briefly how old Near and Mello were, and why hadn't he bribed Ryuk to write their names down yet? He'd have to ask Ryuk later.

"Ah. And if I insist that I have perfectly legitimate reason to be here?"

"Unless your perfectly legitimate reason is that you're stalking me I'm not gonna believe you," Light said with childish obstinacy. *I'm right, you're wrong, and that's all there is to it*. That was a universal child trait, not a Kira trait, whatever L might have said a lifetime ago.

"Aren't you cold?" he demanded inquisitively before L could respond.

L looked down at his faded jeans and thin sweater. "No."

"You should wear a coat." Light said authoritatively. He dropped his gaze to L's bare feet. "And shoes," he added. "No one wants to see your monkey toes, especially if they get frostbitten or something." Just this once Light would confess that he liked being a child again. The opportunity to insult L without looking like he meant it was a benefit that almost balanced out the disadvantages of the situation all by itself.

"I'm fine--"

"It's nearly December," Light said firmly, fixing him with a gimlet stare that said he doubted L's mental capabilities. He loved being able to freely use that expression on L without the man adding ten percentage points. "It's cold. You should wear a coat." He paused to look at the sky (blocked by Ryuk's grinning face).

"This is great!" Ryuk said happily. "I think I missed this guy."

Light twitched his lips obligingly at the shinigami and returned his attention to L. "I think it's gonna snow soon, so I have to get home."

He found himself unable to resist another dig. "Don't follow me," he added with a look of stern disapproval.

L scowled at him. Light smiled back as innocently as he could manage as he waved goodbye.

---

L almost suspected the boy to be Kira out of sheer aggravation, having never been so annoyed in thirty minutes before.

Yet, once the initial irritation had faded away, he found himself smiling.

Meeting him in the flesh, he could understand exactly why Yagami's teachers thought him unsettling.

L found him intriguing. Yagami Light was the definition of fluid, his every action and reaction wavering between the child expected from his appearance and a full-grown adult. For the briefest of moments, L would catch a glimpse of *something*

(... Kira...)

but in the next instant it would be gone and he would have nothing but a child that wasn't really a child at all.

Further investigation was required. Perhaps the Yagami family required a babysitter...? His school certainly wouldn't mind foisting him off on an unsuspecting teacher specialising in advanced children with requirements beyond the norm...

He would find out what was behind those eyes if it killed him.

---

*How to get rid of L, Plan B...*

"I met a stalker today," Light announced at dinner.

Soichiro choked on his rice.

"He was quite nice," Light continued ingenuously, carefully holding back on the urge to grin at Sayu. "I think he just got into stalking because he couldn't get any other job. I mean, he *looks* like a stalker so..."

Sachiko leant over to thump her husband on the back.

"Yeah?" Sayu said brightly, trying to hide the fact that she was grinning behind her hands.

Light nodded seriously at her. "He's got panda eyes," he explained. "And hair like a bird's nest and shabby clothes, and I don't think he blinks." He leaned close as if to impart a great and terrifying secret. "*At all.*"

"That's enough, Light!" Sachiko protested, evidently being a considerate wife and taking into account her husband's blood pressure.

"Okay," Light said obligingly, and pulled a face at Sayu. Her thin control snapped and he smirked in satisfaction as she giggled helplessly.

"Wh-when was this?" Soichiro demanded, barely recovered from his coughing fit. "*Where* was this?"

"At school." Light said succinctly, and didn't elaborate.

"Answer me, Light! Tell me about this stalker!"

Protective instincts in overdrive, Light noted.... L might vanish into an unknown grave and leave no one but Watari the wiser. *Why* had he never thought to try this to dispose of L before?

"He was sitting on a bench outside waiting for school to end," Light said with exaggerated patience, as if he didn't understand what all the fuss was about. "He's been sitting out there for four days. He

says his name is Ryuzaki, but I don't think it is. Can we have dessert now?" he added hopefully.

He wondered for a moment if his father was having a heart attack, and even looked at Ryuk to make sure the Death Note was still strapped to his belt.

He clearly remembered the last time Ryuk had killed someone. It had taken him five minutes to pull himself, wriggling and swearing, from beneath Takahashi Noboru's lifeless body, and when he'd finally recovered his breath he'd looked up at Ryuk and demanded incredulously, "You killed him?"

Ryuk's look had said two things simultaneously: *Well, duh*, and *what's your problem?* "Accident," he'd said guilelessly.

"Acc- *Accident* ?! Your Death Note *accidentally* unstrapped itself from your belt and jumped into your hands, did it? You *accidentally* got a pen from god knows where? You *accidentally* wrote the bastard's name?!"

"Yup."

His response to that had been forestalled by the slightly too-late appearance of Takeshi and Team Kira, and they'd both discovered to Ryuk's eternal amusement that he could terrify grown men while half-naked.

Although Ryuk had said any shinigami could have decided to kill the guy and the fact that it just happened to be him didn't mean it had anything to do with Light - which he believed, since Ryuk was far more likely to kill out of impulse than a desire to save his bruised skin - it was the last time he used himself as bait.

And as he'd pointed out with great irritation five hours later - after two showers and a large cup of hot chocolate, thus effectively restoring his normal intellectual capabilities - if Ryuk had just brought him

something to hit the bastard over the head with like he'd asked they would never have had the problem in the first place.

Ryuk shrugged innocently at him, and Light returned his gaze back to his father. He appeared to be going red, and that wasn't a very good sign...

"I'm walking you to school tomorrow," he announced at last, voice still choked.

Wow. L was so dead. He'd achieve the goal of his existence without even trying. No wait, he was supposed to be irritated by his dad's over protectiveness... "That's not-"

"Not necessary?" Soichiro demanded. "Of course it's necessary! Light, people like the one you're talking about are dangerous! You should never, never approach them, understand?"

Ryuk started cackling helplessly, and Light was fortunate in that he'd had a lot of practise over the years in refraining from rolling his eyes. "Okay, okay," he said, exasperated, and stared at his empty bowl. He reminded himself that after everything L had done to him, there was no reason to feel sorry for him.

He glanced sideways at Ryuk. "Yeah, I get ya," the shinigami grinned. "Imagine what your dad'll do."

Light felt his lips quirk involuntarily at the thought of L's reaction if his father were to arrest him.

("No, I'm really not stalking your son, Yagami-san. I was merely attempting to gather enough information to validate a theory of mine. You see, I'm really L and I think he might be Kira...")

That would be amusement for the rest of the decade. His smile faded after a moment.

L's sudden presence in his life reminded him uncomfortably of the first time they had met. There had been hundreds of cameras throughout a house containing three potential suspects, and he doubted they'd been the only family under surveillance at time either. Yet L had automatically narrowed his focus to him.

From the way he ate potato chips? The fact he checked to see if anyone went into his room? The porn magazines that were the staple of any teenage boy's bedroom?

True, at the time he had wanted L close to find his name - but never so close that he was the sole focus of the investigation, which would have been an unnecessary risk and more pressure than he needed.

He wasn't killing anybody now - or at least, he wasn't unless Ryuk just happened to decide to extend his lifespan with paedophiles - but he still felt vaguely hunted, and couldn't decide if the feeling was a hang-up from a time when L's face meant that he was walking a tightrope or if L really was hunting him, except without the intention to execute.

Or maybe the intention to execute was still there; he had been quite obnoxious to L at times.

And not just to L either. Not that Near would ever know or understand the significance of Anthony Lester being a false Kira and several other members of the former/future SPK being agents on his payroll, of course, but Light did and that was what mattered.

He quickly turned his thoughts away from Near, who still infuriated him simply by breathing.

L had found him . From a single flower. A single flower among hundreds that Ryuk had--

That *Ryuk* had... that *bastard* .

Ryuk leaned in over his shoulder to get a better look at Soichiro, still muttering dire threats under his breath. "Humans," he cackled delightedly. "Humans never get boring."

"Generally speaking?" Light murmured under his breath as he collected the tableware and headed into the kitchen.

"Yeah," Ryuk called back to him, still entranced by the drama at the dinner table, Sachiko's attempts to calm her husband down and make him see that being impulsive was only going to cause more problems. He had his suspicions that Sachiko had more than inkling of what Light became when he was alone, but had never mentioned them to Light. If she ever confronted him about it, Ryuk wanted to see Light's true reaction. Getting a genuine reaction from Light was rare, but always well worth it.

Light stopped beside the shinigami and watched his mother talk his father out of putting an armed guard around the school. Sayu was watching avidly, her head turning from one to other as if watching a tennis match.

"Ryuk," Light said very softly, glancing between his parents as if he too was following the debate. "You dropped that flower on purpose, didn't you?"

"Me?" Ryuk finally tore his gaze away. "Dunno what you're talking about."

Light's eyes flashed with irritation. "Don't lie to me!" he hissed through gritted teeth, timing the outburst to coincide with a yell from his father about the potential dangers of allowing a sexual predator to run around unchecked near schools.

"You're so paranoid," Ryuk sulked. "Just because I knew you were going to the park. No guarantee L was gonna be there, was there? No guarantee he was even in the *country* ."

"And," Light murmured quietly when Sachiko began to explain quite rationally that there was no guarantee the man Light had told them about was a danger to anyone, "if you went off and fetched one to put in Sayu's path when you realised that he was?"

"You can't prove anything," Ryuk said smugly, looking pleased with himself.

Light shook his head at his parents as if he despaired of their argument and headed to his room, head deliberately bowed so that his hair fell over his eyes in a manner terribly familiar to Ryuk.

It meant that Light was either grinning maniacally or trying to hide the red glint of murder in his eyes. Ryuk was betting on the latter and seriously debated the merits of following him. Eventually he decided that if Light was going to try and kill him it was best to get the attempt over with, rather than avoid him and allow his anger to fester and develop into something even worse.

He slid through the door to find Light waiting for him at the computer. He raised an eyebrow at his entrance and reached out to carefully select an apple from the refilled bowl.

Ryuk had a terrible feeling of foreboding as he watched Light roll the fruit back and forth between his palms.

"Remember that you brought this upon yourself," Light said evenly.

On second thought, foreboding was too weak a word.

---

"Hey, Aiko, does it look like someone's been throwing apples at this wall to you?"

"Don't be silly. Why would someone do that?"

"Seriously, I'm telling you someone's definitely been throwing apples. Look, you can see the where they hit. See?"



"Oh yeah. Hey, Mayu! Come look at this!"

"... it looks like they're outlining something."

"You mean someone stood against the wall and someone else threw apples at them?"

"Bullies?"

"Or stupid boys throwing apples at each other to see whose nerve broke first, whatever. C'mon, my dad'll *kill* me if I'm late."

"But if this was outlining a person they'd have to be about seven foot tall..."

"I said: *What. Ever.* "

---

"Stop it Light!"

"You wanted your apples, didn't you, Ryuk?"

"I want to eat them, I don't want them thrown at me!"

"You should have been more specific."

Ryuk made a noise that was absurdly like a shriek as Light threw another apple. It spattered against the wall where Ryuk's head had been moments before, the shinigami seemingly forgetting about his ability to become intangible and ducking instead.

"The only way you're going to eat one is if you catch it." Light said flatly, and picked up another one from the bag at his feet. "If you don't want to catch one, we're still going to play until all the apples are gone. And when they are, you're not going to see another for a week."

Ryuk whimpered at the thought. "You can't waste apples like this!"

"Just watch me."

The remnants of a Red Delicious decorated Ryuk's left shoulder.

"Is this really because I gave L a hint, or because I killed you?"

"Am I the type to hold grudges? That was a rhetorical question," he added when Ryuk opened his mouth to respond. "Whatever you thought you had to say, that's your answer."

There was a sudden explosion of fruit next to Ryuk's right leg. "That was a Fuji!" he moaned, watching the juice trickle down the wall.

Light shrugged. "Remember how you insisted you were neutral? Whatever happened to that very sensible standpoint?"

"Hey, I was helping!"

He twisted out of the way of an apple aimed at his chest.

"If I desired your help I'd ask and then trick you into giving it. I don't want you messing around behind my back." Out of apples, Light straightened up and relaxed his stance as if he'd never been throwing fruit at an invisible intangible creature. "If you ever," he said, smiling warmly at the shinigami cowering on the ground and desperately trying to gather the largest apple pieces together, "ever do something like that again, Ryuk, I swear you won't eat another apple for a month, however much you whine. Are we clear?"

"Control freak."

Light sighed heavily. "It's really simple, Ryuk," he crouched down to address the shinigami, hands resting on his knees as he watched him disconsolately pick up a large chunk of exploded apple and throw it in his mouth, "Your first and foremost concern when interfering would be whether or not your decision resulted in entertainment for you, never mind that it might cause serious problems for *me*. I really can't take the risk."

"You used to thrive on it."

"Yeah, but I was high on murder.... Lesson learned?"

Ryuk mumbled something under his breath that might have been insults, might have been an earnestly expressed wish that Light fail in his assigned task, get found out by L or simply drop dead.

Light sighed and stood up again. "You know I prefer to be on good terms with you, Ryuk."

"Liar."

"But," Light continued firmly, ignoring the petulant interjection, "sometimes there's only one way to get through to you. Come on, we're going home now."

"My *apples*," Ryuk whimpered piteously.

"Forget the apples."

" *Apples* ."

"... Shut up."

---

A/N: And now you'll really have to wait for the next one. Probably.

## Chapter 7

It turned out that depriving Ryuk of apples was an even more effective punishment than Light had anticipated. Having had years on a semi-regular diet Ryuk felt the sudden withdrawal all that much harder. Light watched without sympathy as Ryuk's hands began to twitch, then shake.

By the time Light walked into the kitchen the next morning, pondering how best to get rid of L now that his mother had - presumably - talked his father out of arresting him, Ryuk was already beginning to rock his head back and forth, twisting his neck impossibly as he croaked a hopeful 'apple?' every time his view changed.

Logically, L's suspicion ought to decrease if his father went through with his plan of arresting him - Light was an innocent child who had told his parents about someone he thought was stalking him and they had reacted appropriately.

Despite all appearances to the contrary, L was not logical. He was reasonably sure the detective would believe Light had manipulated his father into effectively removing a potential threat.

Which was true, but L was still a bastard to think it.

"Apple?"

Light glanced at Ryuk. Ryuk looked back, desperation written in neon all over his face. Light smiled sympathetically and returned his attention to the Problem of L.

If L was arrested, the likelihood of him actually remaining in police custody long enough to enter the system was negligible. The only thing that would happen was that L would be momentarily discomfited, and for the momentary discomfort Light would pay

dearly. L would be convinced Light had masterminded it, therefore Light had something to hide, therefore L should pay even more attention.

Well damn. No wonder killing L had been the simplest option.

Entertaining as it would be, Light decided, it would probably be best if L didn't have a real reason to start looking at him.

He sighed. It went against his every ingrained habit to give L a warning. It was going to be agony.

Light examined his current feelings carefully and noted with exasperation the revived desire to see L safely dead and buried. Why did the man have to make things so difficult? Couldn't he mind his own business? Light wasn't even killing anyone!

Unless he was killing in his sleep. Could you get that addicted to murder?

He thought back. Yes, he decided after a moment, finally acknowledging his habit of reaching for a pen when stressed, it was entirely possible.... There had to be support groups for this kind of thing. This *had* to be affecting his abilities when it came to ensuring criminals lived to see trial.

"Apple," Ryuk whimpered at his side. Light opened his mouth instinctively to ask if Ryuk thought he was a murder-addict and if it coloured Light's responses to certain situations occasionally present in his work, but quickly shut it again, remembering that his parents were in fact also at the table. His father might not be quite in the land of the mentally competent yet but his mother certainly was and Ryuk was barely capable of forming a single word anyway.

There had to be a way to remove L permanently without killing him. Distract him with a scapegoat? Distract him with a real false Kira who actually had a connection to the network? Maybe he should just arrange an accident and hope Watari had enough sense to insist L

recuperate out of the country... Why couldn't he think of anything without a little voice piping up 'just kill him already'?

He was so sure he'd gotten over his kill-everyone-who-makes-life-difficult phase. Damn L. Just damn him.

He looked over at his father, who was staring at his recently acquired cup of coffee as if it contained ambrosia. He didn't think he'd seen him so frazzled since the Kira case. He hummed quietly. Using his murder-gained moniker to hunt criminals was all well and good but it left him rather bemused when he tried to talk to Ryuk about his past life, the shinigami taking every opportunity to pretend he had no idea whether Light was referring to his current occupation or his previous.

Soichiro needed a shave, and a good few more hours of sleep that weren't going to be forthcoming. He wasn't twitching the way he had when Light was handcuffed to L, but... well. Handcuffs. L. Handcuffs *and* L. Light doubted there was anything that could match that horror. And that had been even before Misa's oblivious remarks about ulterior motives and Ryuzaki's probable sexual orientation. He hadn't thought his father could be any more uncomfortable with the situation but it turned out he'd underestimated his father's capacity for emotional response.

He rubbed his wrist gently as he thought. He was so used to the gesture he no longer noticed the undamaged softness of his child skin, the absence of scar tissue he'd actually been perversely proud to bear. L had marked him for the rest of his - admittedly short - life, but Light had won (or so he'd thought), even with one hand in the chains L would like to have put upon both wrists.

To warn L... well, he would just tell him, naturally, being a child with no verbal brakes. He had plenty of time, if his father went through the normal channels to get a warrant.

He flicked his gaze back to his mother as she bustled happily round the kitchen, preparing a boxed lunch that would doubtlessly contain more bribery for L. Time to test the waters and see if she had in fact

talked his father out of spontaneous arrests. He could remind Ryuk of his folly while he was at it. "Do you think Stalker-san would like apple juice?" he said curiously. Ryuk uttered an absolutely horrific whine that became a series of desperate invectives against everything in any way remotely connected to Light.

Maybe that hadn't been the best idea, Light noted to himself. Sooner or later his dad was going to choke on his own tongue.

"Light," he spluttered after a moment, when he finally regained control of his mouth, "about this stalker of yours-"

"You think he would?" Light said brightly, blinking wide, innocent eyes at him.

"No! Light- I mean--" Soichiro sighed heavily. "If you see this man, I don't want you going anywhere near him, you understand? I'm going to try and get a warrant for his arrest-"

*Read: I am going to get a warrant if I have to blackmail Kitamura to get it,* Light thought, nodding his comprehension. It wouldn't occur to his father to simply arrest L anyway.

"-but that could take a little time, and if-"

"I get it," Light interrupted, unwilling to listen to the standard say-no-to-strangers speech for what was possibly the sixth time. And in just his second life at that. "Don't look at him, don't go near him, definitely don't take any candy, and scream if he looks at me funny."

"Er... yes, well..."

"Scream really *really* loudly," Light said firmly, indicating that he considered the topic closed and any further advice unnecessary.

His parents exchanged one of those little glances Light couldn't fathom the content of, depending as it did upon the participants and the bond between them. The only individual Light was capable of

speaking to with a glance was currently lying on the kitchen floor in a tangle of overlong limbs and rattling silver accessories. And the only human who came halfway close was probably hunched over a computer screen and plotting his downfall.

Clearly there was something wrong with Light and his interaction with the rest of the world that his greatest attachment was to a death god who would kill him given half the opportunity, followed closely by a man who would do the same if he could just find the right excuse.

"What your father means, Light, is you should stay as far away from him as possible until your father is there to deal with him."

"Wasn't that what I said I'd do?" Light said, surprised.

"Light."

He heaved a put-upon sigh. "I swear I won't go near him," he lied matter-of-factly. "Dad, you're late for work."

Soichiro jerked his eyes to the clock and swore.

"That's such a bad example," Ryuk giggled from somewhere around Light's feet. "No wonder you're a psychopathic maniac, you nasty apple-hating--"

One of Light's tapping feet jerked suddenly out of its rhythm and connected with Ryuk's stomach. The yelp neatly covered what his father was telling him to be wary of as he rushed around the kitchen looking for his ID.

Time to warn L. And knowing the detective, he probably wouldn't take any notice and Light would get some entertainment for his cookies.

Oh, the joy of seeing L in a jail cell. L had better be afraid. And Ryuk had better be taking note and promising himself that he would never interfere again. Or Light would have to think up something drastic



and Ryuk wasn't in any condition to appreciate the horror of Light's drastic measures.

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L was being a model of self-restraint. It was taking more out of him than he'd anticipated, but he hadn't kicked the boy yet, so he must be doing something right.

He scratched at one (unfortunately shoe-covered) foot and craned his head for a better look at the boy sitting next to him, kicking his heels back and forth. And nibbling at a cookie. Mustn't forget that. He didn't even look like he was enjoying it, so, unlikely as the possibility of a child *not* enjoying a cookie was, L had to assume he was doing it solely to torment him.

He suspected that just about every aspect of their interaction was designed to torment him. Kira-point.

"Stop staring," the boy said, irritated, his own eyes fixed at some point in the middle-distance in front of him. L looked. Nothing but an uninteresting stream of people. "It's really creepy."

The slightest of pauses before 'creepy'. Another word would have been used, speaking to someone else, L suspected. Someone who didn't expect an eleven year old. Half point.

(Why did the boy approach him again? He had expected perhaps Yagami Soichiro, armed with a pair of handcuffs, in which case he would have run for it the minute he spotted him. The boy approached him, despite being clearly uneasy in his presence and quite determined to drive him off, and L suspected it was not his personal magnetism that was responsible.

Perhaps he didn't think it worth the risk of possibly revealing his... extracurricular activities... to his parents. Or perhaps he was testing the waters. Or maybe it was the same thing that makes children poke dangerous - or decaying - things with a stick.)

"My apologies, Light-kun."

"My apologies, Light-kun," Light mimicked, voice becoming level and dull, somehow managing to be a caricature in monotone, uncanny and cruel in its accuracy. "At least lie as if you mean it."

"Haven't you ever been told lying is *wrong*?" L said curiously, widening his eyes to take his image in whole.

He laughed, and the harsh edges suddenly dropped out of existence and he was nothing more than a little boy, bright and enthusiastic and full of the sheer joy of living. "Silly stalker-san," he said affectionately, as if the very notion of lying being wrong was foolish. "People lie all the time. You're lying right now, calling yourself Ryuzaki-san. How's anyone supposed to get the idea lying is wrong if everybody is doing it?"

L considered it for a moment. "I don't know." He opened his mouth to pursue the topic when Light leant down and shuffled through his bag, successfully retrieving a cookie. L forgot what he intended to say. "Are you going to eat that?"

"You can have it," Light said magnanimously, offering it ceremoniously as if conveying a great favour, when L was reasonably certain he'd planned for 'Stalker-san' to have it anyway. Brat. Absolute - ah, double chocolate. He could give the benefit of the doubt, he supposed, just this once.

He munched contentedly, eyes on his companion's face while appearing occupied with his really quite delicious piece of confectionary. For a split second he saw a look of exasperation, oddly tender and amused - familiar. Then the boy blinked, looked up and started kicking his heels again, leaving L unsettled. Nobody was familiar with L. Even Watari wouldn't look at him like that, as if he knew everything about L (which he couldn't, because he was often off doing menial tasks L couldn't be bothered to do himself) and thought he was something amusing, if a trifle dangerous.

"Stalker-san," Light said suddenly, seriously. "I don't think we're going to meet any more."

"Oh?" L said blandly, cleaning his crumb-covered fingers meticulously with his tongue. "After a grand total of only two meetings? Why not?"

" *Because*," Light stressed the word carelessly, glittering eyes unintentionally giving away his amusement, "my father's getting a warrant for your arrest as we speak. I did tell you," he added mildly when L opened his mouth to voice his utter incomprehension of such an action. Instant grasp of L's likely response and articulation upon it. Kira-point.

"Is he now?" L murmured, dropping his gaze to where Light held his left wrist, circling it with the fingers of the opposing hand as if to replace something else. Ingrained habit, L decided, noting the apparent unawareness of the tic and easy disregard for L's attention. Or was that what he wanted L to think, distracting him from the ultimate goal with fruitless queries as to where and how and why would he develop such an unusual displacement activity?

Pretending he didn't understand, Light nodded contentedly. L narrowed his eyes suspiciously and weighed up the chances that Light was attempting to scare him off. He had considered the possibility, yes, but being flat-out told it was a different matter all together. There was the slimmest possibility he was being altruistic, but that had never struck L as being one of Kira's salient points. "Is he now..." he repeated. "You know, Light-kun, I do believe you're lying."

"Ryuzaki-san!" the boy mocked, voice rising in mock-horror, "weren't you just saying lying was *wrong* ? Why would I lie?"

"Because you have something to hide," L said imperturbably. The exceedingly polite Ryuzaki-san had made an appearance twice before, when someone had walked within hearing distance. L hadn't thought it was possible to prefer 'Stalker-san' to an alias, but

somehow the way the boy said it touched a nerve he rather suspected he needed in order to make it through the entire conversation without losing his temper.

"What would I have to hide?" Light said innocently, face instantly sober and serious, eyes dancing.

(This game was so familiar.)

"I don't know," L said darkly, with a glance that promised doom - supposing the recipient was aware enough to realise it. "But I will find out."

The boy's lips parted, peeling back from white teeth in a wide grin that set L's nerves on edge. *Go ahead and try* said the grin. "I'm just saying," he shrugged. "So don't go and blame me when your stalker tendencies get you in trouble. You need help, by the way."

"I am aware."

"Really? Because, you know, you *are* still here. Stalking me."

"I am not stalking you."

"Mm."

"You approached me, you'll remember."

"You were waiting for me. You looked lonely so I took pity."

"I am doing a close reconnaissance."

"I think you're lying to yourself. That tops plain old lying, period."

"Kira."

"What?"

L twisted in his itchy, uncomfortable coat, blinking as a flake of snow hit his nose. "Nothing," he lied, trying to judge what reaction Yagami had - if any - to being dismissed as a nonentity. Precisely nothing beyond bland confusion, he noted approvingly.

(There was always the chance that there was no reaction beyond confusion because Yagami Light had absolutely nothing to do with Kira. L just didn't think it was very likely.)

"Then why'd you say it?"

L shrugged, sticking his tongue out to try and catch some snow.

"Time to go," Light announced, standing up and slinging his bag over his shoulder. "And I really mean it this time, stop following me."

"I'm not following you," L pointed out. Which was true - he didn't need to.

Light looked irritated, and shook his head wildly to get the gathering snow out. "Bye, Stalker-san," he said sweetly, and took off at a run. L watched him go, heedless of the sharp wind and the now heavy snowfall. He tapped his fingers against his knees as he thought. A day or two more and Watari would be worn down enough to provide him with some particular false identification.

Talking with the boy was all well and good, but as entertaining as it was, it was giving him nothing more than vague suspicions and the occasional headache. If he could get close enough, if he just found the right leverage, the right key to flustering the most self-possessed child he'd ever met, (Kira) would do all the telling himself.

L hunted criminals. He was very practised in making even the most cold-blooded and methodical break cover. He wanted Kira's identity, he'd have it, one way or another, whether the boy was it or not.

L rather suspected the boy was it.

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Light was dragging his heels in a way that would make a toddler proud. It wasn't that he wasn't eager to see if L was going to grace a prison cell with his presence anytime soon. It was just that Ryuk was whimpering desperately in his ear, that his father was striding beside him with an unconscious arrogance that made Light smirk in startled recognition, that he had been thinking hard about L and was feeling--

Feeling. Light had gotten used to feeling nothing much beyond a kind of grey contentment, a muffling cotton wool wrap of knowing that he might not be changing the world with a pen stroke, but at least he wasn't going to have self-righteous ("Pot calling the kettle black much?" Ryuk had muttered) detectives at his doorstep anytime soon, plotting to kill him.

Evidently some things just made the world turn.

He had been his most alive early on - before Kira had really carved out his foothold - faced with death at the slightest misstep and to his mind L belonged to that time, that life. L was the voice that spoke to him the middle of the night before he ever knew the face of his enemy, saying *I'm hunting you; what are you going to do about it?* L was blank eyes staring at him from across the table, saying innocuous things baited with poison. L was the body beside him in the dark, cuff around his wrist; close enough to warm him, never enough to smother and whispering *I know I'm right* as Light curled his hands into fists, unable and unwilling to hear the sudden thread of uncertainty in what had once been a statement of fact .

And here was L again, no longer aware of the dance steps but trying his hardest nonetheless, and Light felt himself shaking off his comfortable detachment and waking up. L was a slap in the face, a lit match to paper.

Like Ryuk said, it was no fun with only one player.

Light had missed him more than he'd ever thought possible, more than he'd even realised he had the ability to feel, and he thought he

might hate him more for making him aware of that than for anything else L had ever done.

"Light, I want you to hold my hand while I look for this man."

"I'm not holding your hand!" he protested, scandalised. He was pretty sure he'd *never* held his father's hand, even when he really was eleven.

He couldn't remember much of his life first time round until the Death Note fell into his hands; he figured it was either that his second, more aware childhood had overwritten those old memories (teething was not something he ever wished to repeat a third time) or the Death Note itself had wiped out those old memories. Everything from the time the Death Note fell out of the sky in front of him was so much brighter, so much sharper, more real than everything that came before.

He remembered his father mostly as a devoted fool he could manipulate so easily, with the merest widening of his eyes, the right amount of passion in his voice when he spoke of Justice, of Kira being a criminal. Once, he suspected, the thought would have horrified him.

Soichiro looked briefly hurt before he pretended he understood that Light's eleven-year-old pride would take a serious dent if he were seen holding his father's hand like a toddler. Light thought of L, how he would have said that Light's pride could use all the denting it could get.

Maybe that explained L's penchant for spilling things on Light's lap. Honestly. "I think you might be Kira," he'd said constantly, and went and did something so stupid, knowing Light as well as he did. Even if Light hadn't been Kira (which he wasn't... at the time) he would have tried to kill him for that. L couldn't care less if he looked like a insomniac crack addict but Light took pride in his appearance and every time L thought it funny to play butterfingers he made it just that little bit easier for Kira to find a place waiting.

L. Smartest idiot alive. Dead. Whatever.

Ryuk was beginning to make the most annoying little whimpering noises. Light momentarily considered the merits of seeing if Sayu's apple scented shampoo would do anything for him. He made a mental note and was just turning to tell his father he didn't think his stalker was there when he spotted L, staring at the sky with the glazed look of someone either deep in thought or on something illegal. Perhaps both.

Light felt his lips curve with unholy joy.

He had honestly expected L to back off, adapt his gained information to the already existing paradigm he'd formed and evaluate how best to make his next approach from a different angle. So really, L had only himself to blame for what was about to happen.

"Hi, Stalker-san!" Light called brightly, sensing more than seeing his father's head whip round to look at him and then follow his line of sight.

"Is that him?" he demanded, already starting off in L's direction.

Light's grin, to his father - who had no real experience with Light's moods - was bright and cheerful and blindingly innocent. He sped up his pace accordingly to confront the crouched man who would take advantage of such innocence.

L, who already had a better grasp of Light's nature (or perhaps was applying his imagined view of Kira onto him) saw the same smile as being cat-canary pleased and vaguely sharklike in its expectation.

Light was too far away to actually hear what L said under his breath just before his father reached him and he didn't have a good enough view to read his lips, but from Ryuk's distracted *whoo* he gathered that it was extremely rude.



"Ouch, that looks painful," he mused aloud as he watched L's arm being twisted up behind his back far harder than was strictly necessary as his father loudly read him his rights and made sure the gathering crowd knew that L was suspected of. Ryuk, now in the third terrifying stage of apple-withdrawal, tried his hardest to not to tangle his arms up like a pretzel and focus on the drama.

"Painful," he echoed. "Painful... Light, I *need* an apple."

"This," Light murmured to Ryuk with dreamy satisfaction as he watched L being cuffed and pushed - protesting all the while - to the waiting police car, "is the most perfect moment of both my lives."

"Light, I *really need* an apple. I can't appreciate this without an apple!"

L, twisting his head awkwardly to get a glimpse of Yagami Light, saw the grin on the boy's face and thought that for the first time ever the use of the word 'demonic' would not be hyperbole.

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L did not like his current situation. At all. He liked it about as much as being forced to sing naked in front of a crowd of criminals he'd sentenced to the death penalty... And even that was an understatement.

He stared blankly at Chief Yagami. He actually found himself sympathising with him, which irritated him no end. The man had *arrested* him. Him. L. As in, World's Greatest Detective L - properly preceded by an italicised 'the'.

They'd both been masterfully played.

It was extremely childish, not to mention unprofessional, but he found himself adding ten Kira-points to The Demon Child's score anyway.

"May I use the phone?"

Yagami stared.

"Please."

"No."

L considered his options, shrugged, waited for Yagami to pay attention to the ubiquitous police paperwork and withdrew the mobile phone he'd pocketed off an officer who'd nearly walked into him the hall while carrying a tray covered in cups of hot coffee.

He made a mental note to ask Watari to research smaller and more portable communication devices.

He dialled the number rapidly and figured there could be no harm in Yagami thinking him mentally unstable. He was sure The Demon Child had already laid the foundation.

"William," he muttered the moment Watari answered. "I need help."

There was a pause, followed by a long-suffering sigh at the other end. "I leave you alone for five minutes," Watari murmured under his breath. "What have you done now?"

"I think you'll find it was one hour and seventeen minutes," L said pointedly, "And I've been arrested for stalking Yagami Light."

"... dare I say it?"

"You might as well," L said irritably, flicking a resentful glance to the elder Yagami. He smiled vaguely when the man looked up, the phone immediately slipping out of sight. "William is my guardian spirit," he said brightly in faintly accented Japanese. "He's the Alfred to my Batman. D'you want to see him? He's right over there-" he waved vaguely at the blank wall behind him, "--only he's invisible right now."

With a contemptuous snort, Yagami got up and told the new officer - Matsuda, wasn't it? - to watch him while he went off in search of the

caffeine required to face a mentally deficient client of the correctional system.

L stared at him until he started to squirm. "There's a spider next to your head."

L was reasonably sure he could finish the rest of the conversation before Matsuda realised he was searching for a phantom. The resulting yelp and desperate search for the monster L described was enjoyable in its own right however, and he kept one eye on the proceedings, more to be entertained than out of any worry that the officer might realise what he was doing.

"I told you so." Watari sighed when he returned the phone to his ear, voice notably lacking in the triumph L expected.

"I have been outmanoeuvred by a child," L said flatly, willing Watari to sense his despair and wounded pride and sympathise. "The situation is intolerable."

"Is there no likelihood of you accepting the far more likely course of events as being that he simply told his parents a strange man was following him?"

"No."

"It is not a good means of operation for a detective to assume immediately that your suspect is guilty. You've been taught far better than that."

"You didn't see the look he gave me as I was being read my rights," L snapped. "He knew *exactly* what was going on and that he had caused it."

"Ryuzaki, surely you remember what you were like as a child? Children are, to be frank, selfish, bloodthirsty monsters. The boy was discomfited by you-" Watari typically ignored L's snort of disbelief, "-thus he was relieved to see you removed. That is a natural

response. That he enjoyed *your* discomfort is also natural to children his age."

"I'm telling you there was nothing childlike about it. He planned it all and was pleased with the success of his plan. Are you going to help me out of here or are you going to continue to gloat?"

"I'll arrange something. Promise you will stay away from the boy when you are out?"

"I promise I will not approach the boy."

Which meant joining the school was out of the question, Watari would recognise it for what it was, a transparent attempt to get close to Yagami. L was not currently investigating anything other than his own curiosity. If on the other hand he approached via the parents, he would be keeping his promise to Watari. Sachiko then, since the likelihood of Soichiro letting L anywhere near his children was about the same as L being invited to model.

How to make her trust him enough to leave him with her children? Where did she get her regular babysitter from (speaking of which: accident) and how did he make sure she didn't choose anyone else?

"Good," Watari said firmly, voice dragging him back to more immediate concerns. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Ten," L said before throwing the phone out of the nearest open window.

If The Demon Child thought getting him thrown in a prison cell was going to make him lose interest or consider the risk too high to pursue such an unlikely chance he was mistaken. He might as well have taped a sign to his back saying 'here be Kira.'

He smiled at Soichiro when the man returned. He didn't think it calmed him any. Good.

## Chapter 8

Light's twelfth birthday came and went and in all that time L hadn't so much as planted a camera. Light's father was of course relieved at the stalker's sudden disappearance, and gradually relaxed in his zealous attempts to ensure Light never went outside with less than three bodyguards. Light, on the other hand, found himself getting more and more wound up as more time passed and nothing happened. L doing nothing was even worse than L doing something, much as his former murdering self would like to deny it. Clearly L was planning something. L was planning something and Light had no idea what and that was just not on.

He shivered, turned, paced the room, turned, and paced again. Ryuk watched with lazy amusement. Light considered stopping his apples again for the sheer hell of it. "What is he up to?" he muttered, ignoring Ryuk's quiet snicker at his discomposure. "What, what, *what*? Have I missed something?" If L didn't make his move, how was Light supposed to plan his next three?

What to do... what to do... there was no way he could possibly just wait. Give up the advantage of the first strike? Please. He needed a plan for every eventuality. Even the possibility that L might even have give up, though the chances of that were so remote he'd happily agree to let Ryuk go on a killing spree if that were the case.

"Is he even in the country?" Ryuk said indifferently, flipping through his Death Note and stopping at a page faintly marred with the imprint of a name that he traced very carefully with a nail.

"Of course he's in the country!" Light snapped. "He just finished with the Fukuoka case!"

"Maybe he got bored?" Ryuk offered.

"Say something that stupid again and I'm stopping your apples for the sake of your intelligence," Light snarled. For the sake of their sort-of friendship Ryuk pretended to take the threat seriously. Poor Light. Battling wits with L was fine - in fact, it was his greatest delight - but when L did nothing it threw him entirely out of sorts, despite all his claims that he just wanted L to go away and find something else to entertain himself with.

"What is he planning?" Light demanded of thin air, hands clenching at his sides. "He's got something in mind, he must!" He frowned. "Unless he has nothing planned at all..."

Ryuk settled down to watch Light's already twisty thoughts snarl themselves up into Gordian knots.

"Or he's had something in mind ever since he was arrested and is waiting just to drive me insane..."

"He knows you well," Ryuk said dryly, pretending he could follow what Light was talking about.

"Of course he do-doesn't," Light corrected hastily. "I mean, the old L would, but this one's never met me before and couldn't possibly..." he trailed off, distracted by a new avenue of thought. "And if he does I've severely underestimated him, and he must have something very big in mind..."

Ryuk grinned. Light knew Ryuk well enough to sense his silent amusement and whirled round to face him. "You could find him!" he said, eyes gleaming in a manner vaguely reminiscent of Kira in one of his more deranged moments. "Find him and tell me what he's up to!"

"Sorry Light, no can do."

Light stared. It had been so long since the last time Ryuk had tried to pretend he wasn't on Light's side for the apples that he was sure he'd misheard.

Ryuk snorted. "Shinigami, remember?" he said patiently. "And neutral, as *you* insisted. I don't follow a human's orders and I'm not on your side."

Light sucked in an outraged breath, eyes narrowing with a clearly visible rising tide of fury. "Ryuk!" he hissed. He looked like he was fully prepared to recite every single instance when Ryuk had in fact followed his orders for one reason or another, and Ryuk cut him off in a hurry.

"Even if I had the slightest idea where to look - and if you don't, I certainly don't - I wouldn't know what to pay attention to, I'd probably forget it before I got back, and you'd just get even more angry with me."

"Don't pretend to be more of a bumbling idiot than you are," Light snapped. "I know you're perfectly capable of what I'm asking, Ryuk. And I *am* asking. Nicely. *Very nicely* ." Contrary to his words, his tone indicated he was not asking nicely in the slightest, and was, despite the phrasing, threatening Ryuk with all manner of punishments if he didn't obey.

"You can't have it both ways," Ryuk pointed out firmly, pretending he wasn't intimidated in the slightest by Light's furious glare. He knew Light was disconcerted by L's apparent inaction, but this was ridiculous.

"I can have it any way I want," Light said, Kira glaring very obviously out of his childish face. "And consider the apple you just had your last one!"

Ryuk's mouth dropped open, revealing sharp, juice-stained teeth. "You can't be serious!"

"When am I not?" Light said coolly, and turned away to stare out of the window and pretend he didn't know his actions were both unfair and potentially life-threatening.

"You bipolar brat!"

Light had to admit, he probably deserved that with everything he put Ryuk through. Then he reminded himself that Ryuk had killed him and felt a little more righteous. "I don't think it's called bipolar any more," he said absently, staring blankly at the sky. "What is he *planning*?" he murmured, ignoring Ryuk's rising shrieks of furious insults.

Light was very familiar with the hair-raising, ozone-sting sensation that a single-lettered enemy was planning something potentially disastrous for him, despite a complete and total lack of anything resembling supporting evidence. Right now he was practically choking on it.

The downside of constantly planning how to make the best of L's decisions regardless of whether - for L - they succeeded or failed in thwarting him was that Light often ended up mentally backed into a corner he'd probably never see in real life but still had to examine. He'd once given a long, detailed explanation of how he managed this to Ryuk, but had lost him after three of L's potential moves.

On the (singular) upside, it had taught him that L could rarely do anything as bad as he imagined. If L would just do whatever he was planning it would be fine, Light would know where he stood and what moves to try. He'd probably be severely inconvenienced, perplexed and struggling to free himself from myriad tripwires for quite some time, but still fine.

All this waiting was going to drive him to Desperate Measures. Desperate Measures would give far too much away to L. Unless of course, those Desperate Measures involved tricking Ryuk into killing him. Which was possible, if Light only tilted his head a little and squinted at the situation from a shinigami's viewpoint and then took a glance at Ryuk, his preferred amusements, past actions and likely motivations. Unfortunately, he suspected that the Shinigami King would call foul, and Light did not intend to lose because of L, regardless of his incredible powers of irritation.



So no killing L just to stop the uncertainty. Distraction was always good - but if he didn't know where L was or what he was doing, how was he supposed to distract him? Unless there was something he could do that would, regardless of L's level of obsession, supersede any investigation at all. He knew one, he was pretty sure, but couldn't quite remem-

"Are you listening to me?!" Ryuk demanded.

Startled, Light shut off his thought process and made sure to mark it for later reviewing when Ryuk was in a more accommodating mood - or twisted into silence by apple withdrawal, which was far more likely to come first. "Of course, Ryuk," he said soothingly. "You can make your case for unfair treatment now. If you can give me five good reasons, I'll even retract the apple ban."

Poor Ryuk. In anything requiring the brain, Light would always have the edge. He settled back for an interesting debate.

---

Sachiko rarely left her children alone for the sake of a night out. It wasn't entirely the selfless devotion of a fulltime mother and housewife.

She still remembered the first time she left Light with a babysitter, the way he smiled and gurgled on cue for her, the blank look of irritation when the girl turned away to assure them she would take good care of their 'darling boy'.

Part of her worried about Light, about what he could do, watched by an oblivious babysitter. Part of her worried even more that he might push their credibility too far, that he might somehow, unwittingly, reveal that side of him that had terrified her when he was a baby and still frightened her.

She never hired the same sitter twice if she could help it, she paid a little more than she should, she lectured Light and Sayu at length on how she expected them to act while she was gone, what she did not

want to hear from the babysitter when she came back. Light, she knew, understood that these were not general guidelines about treating guests.

It didn't stop the faint fluttering of worry in the back of her mind every time she tried to enjoy an evening out, how tense she became, until what was supposed to be a night out ended with a tension headache and the desire to give up entirely on a social life outside of familial concerns.

It was basic psychology, the type a mother picks up on automatic - when your child is at home, they are more casual, less guarded. They are more confident, less concerned about appearances, and with Light of all people appearance was everything because it was so very fragile and it would be so obvious, what he was, if anyone just bothered to look.

Light. Did all parents - all mothers - wrap their lives around protecting their children the way she did? She knew he thought he was perfectly capable of fooling anyone, and maybe he could - she was his mother, a different thing entirely - but she still tried her hardest to keep him safe. He didn't *need* her to protect him the way Sayu did, he probably didn't care in the slightest about her efforts, though she had no doubt that he noticed them. Yet she worried about him anyway, pointlessly, helplessly.

But... just watching him these days was making her head ache. She didn't know what was wrong - she never did - but obviously something in his secret life was gnawing at him, to that point that she could hardly stand to look at him. Dangerous or not, she needed a break.

The young man opposite her tilted his head slightly as she worried her lip with indecision. "If you need to think about this more..."

"No," she shook her head slightly. Kenji shoved his hands in his pockets, looking as if he would prefer to slouch but had had the habit drilled out of him. He looked like a sensible young man, although she

didn't understand why he wanted to spend his evening babysitting when he clearly needed as much sleep as he could get - his attempts to conceal the bags under his eyes might have worked with anyone else, with someone who wasn't a mother whose child had tried the same trick a dozen times. She had the feeling he had no idea just how hard he was going to have to work for the little money he was getting.

"This is my number," she murmured, scrawling it hastily on a notepad. "Now, the children are to go to bed no later than eight o'clock, *don't* give them anything sweet, and if I haven't written it down on the list, assume they aren't allowed to do it. Okay?"

He nodded, smiling with an endearing look of worry. Poor boy. Light was going to have a field day. "Speaking of which- "Light! Sayu! Say hello to the babysitter!"

The children barrelled in, Light deliberately barring Sayu's way the instant he saw Kenji standing in the kitchen. His eyes narrowed dangerously, and Sachiko wondered if he knew just how much he gave away with that look. "Who's this?" he said suspiciously.

She shivered, and blamed it on the thin silk of her dress. There was a definite edge to his voice that she hadn't heard before when he'd played this game with other sitters.

"This is Kenji-san," she said, forcing herself to smile and wondering if she should call Soichiro and tell him she couldn't get to his party after all. "He's going to look after you both while I'm at the party with your father."

Light's eyes glittered, but with what she couldn't - didn't want to know. Sayu waved blindly around his back.

"Kenji-san, this is Light and - if you'd just take a step to the left, Light - Sayu."

The introduction did very little to lessen the tension. She wondered if Light could read the desperation in her eyes, because he suddenly snorted and ushered Sayu ahead of him out of the kitchen. "We'll be fine," he called back firmly, leaving her to apologise half-heartedly to the bemused looking Kenji for her children's rudeness.

He didn't seem to mind, but Sachiko couldn't shake the image of Light's glare out of her mind as she left.

---

Ryuk cackled helplessly. Light wasn't sure he was entirely aware of just what was going on.

If he didn't know L so well... it was incredible, the difference the alterations in his stance and general body language made, how every part of him was groomed to present the perfect façade of sensible, serious babysitter, needing money (probably for college) and willing to work hard for it.

Impressive. It was probably a good thing he was too busy being shocked over L - L - moonlighting as a babysitter to be truly shocked about his appearance. To see him standing up straight - it was almost enough to give *Light* a heart attack. A flippant part wondered if he had been taller than Light at the time of his death.

He drew in a deep breath that did nothing to calm him and everything to alert L to his state of 'oh shit the bastard's outmanoeuvred me what do I do now think think think!'.

What was the typical response from a child to a stalker in this situation? Did he scream or did he kick L where it hurt?

*Think think think - he's in my house, in my home - think - be a child, just a normal child!*

"You're not the normal babysitter," Light said, taking care to keep his belligerent tone to what he estimated to be natural in a spoilt child inconvenienced by parental whims. L probably knew there wasn't a

regular babysitter, but there was no harm in trying to keep up the oblivious pretence in front of Sayu.

L removed his hands from his pockets and held them out in a gesture of innocence. His body language suddenly became wide open and vulnerable. Light was sorely tempted to kick him in his unprotected groin. If Sayu weren't in the house... and if L wasn't so very likely to kick him in the face in return...

"Sayu, I think Kenji-san should meet Usagi, what do you think?"

Light remembered punching with the intention to hurt only once before L. It had been a stupid little boy who'd copied Sayu's answers on a test, an act of stupidity based on the assumption that her brother was a genius so she must be too. He'd had the gall to complain when he didn't do well - Sayu hated mathematics - and Light remembered that no vicious diatribe he could have given (and he could have given a fantastic one) could ever have matched up to the satisfaction of sinking his fist into his gut. Sayu was nowhere near stupid, and Kira might have forgotten the nature of cleverness, pitting his wits against the greatest detective minds available, but Light hadn't. Sayu was smart enough to understand that she didn't know what was going on between her brother and the new babysitter, and smart enough to understand that she probably didn't want to and that Light was giving her an exit. She quickly made herself scarce, casting wary glances at both her brother and the intruder he disliked so much.

Light waited until he heard her door slam before he turned his full attention back to L. "Aren't you supposed to be in prison?"

L shrugged.

Light felt his lip curl and knew that even though the expression had only been visible for a second, if that, L had noticed it. "I'm going to get you put on a register."

"Do you know my name to put it on a register?" L said curiously.

"Who do you think I am?" Light said with a patience he didn't feel.

"Kira." L responded promptly, to Light's non-existent surprise.

"Kira's a detective, right? So if I'm a detective, I must know your name."

L nodded as if the argument made perfect sense and continued to stare at him. Light stared back, although considerable effort was required to match L's effortless vacuity.

Perhaps Light just didn't get it. The cameras, illegal as they were, he had expected as par for the course in a murder investigation. He could understand that, however overboard it had seemed at the time; he'd used the same trick in a few investigations himself. He could understand L posing as a student to get close to a suspect. But - pretending to be a babysitter? For no reason other than he thought- what? What was he thinking? Light was a child, not a criminal. And if he was, L had better take a damn good look in the mirror, because everything Light did as a detective he'd learnt from L, either acting as him or being hunted by him.

(Odd, that *L*, who had worked so hard to punish him for setting himself up as judge and executioner, would teach him ruthlessness beyond a heart attack.)

It simply felt *wrong* to have L here in a way it hadn't Before. But then, Before, Light and Ryuzaki had been friends. You invited your friends to your home, even if you knew they were going to search your room every time you left them alone longer than five minutes. And also knowing that you were letting yourself in for constant offhand remarks about your porn stash.

"Do you want to play a game, Light-kun?"

*killhim* shutup

"What sort of game?" Light asked suspiciously.

L gave that quirk of the lips that served him as a true smile. "Perhaps you should tell me," he suggested innocently. "After all, you seem to hold all the cards."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Light said and wondered if, when Sayu returned, he could simply grab her and run. He supposed he could, but he was not going to hole himself up in his room because L had managed to keep himself out of a cell and trick his way into the house. He had his pride to think about.

He knew this pattern as well as he knew the rules of the Death Note - and he knew them better than two average shinigami put together. L moved a step forward. Kira - Light took a step forward to the side.

"Of course you don't," L said pleasantly, nodding.

*hithim* shutup

"Liiight!" Sayu barrelled back into the room, her stuffed rabbit toy swinging by his ears in her tightly clenched fist.

"Saaaayuuuu!" Light sang back, allowing himself a fleeting grin when L grimaced. "Sayu," he repeated, at a more sensible decibel level.

He looked back at L - how familiar, how *right* to have his unblinking gaze again, to be able to see him thinking *I'm going to unravel you, I'm going to find the heart of you and eat it* - and had what Ryuk would term An Interesting Idea, interchangeable with an ordinary person's Horrific Idea. "You know, I think Kenji-san wants to play, what do you think?"

L blinked, nonplussed.

*This was a step too far. This is enemy territory for you.* Light smiled in a way Ryuk would recognise, if Ryuk weren't still twisted into something resembling the most inept piece of knotwork outside of the group that had attempted to kidnap Light when he 'wandered away' on a school trip.

Sayu paused for a moment. Light raised his head and smiled in a way that was completely foreign to Kira, altered his body language and expression minutely and became Elder Brother who read her bedtime stories and frightened away the monsters under the bed and had a nasty idea in mind. She nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah!"

"I don-" L started.

"What shall we play, little sis?"

"Ummm."

"I have an idea..."

L seemed to grasp the gravity of his situation and started to protest. "I really d-"

"Get something to blindfold him with, Sayu."

"... Could you repeat that?" L looked like he was really starting to doubt his methods. It was a day for firsts, Light decided. The first time he'd ever seen evidence that there were styling products capable of taming L's hair, for instance. He hoped it wasn't going to be a first for seeing L kick a little girl because otherwise they'd both be in a lot of trouble. His mother would be outraged if she came home and he'd maimed the babysitter.

"We're going to play Interrogation, Kenji-san," he said, his mouth smiling and his eyes saying 'I really really want you to suffer and killing you is just not enough'. The part of him that had never gotten over his fifty-day incarceration and still hated plain rooms hissed *you have a lot of experience with that* . He blinked and shut it out.

"... your previous babysitters weren't kidding..."

"I thought you wanted to play a game, *Kenji-san* ?" Light said, and smiled.

"Ah." L breathed. "I see you."



"Of course you do," Light said frankly. "I'm right here."

" *Kira*," L said.

Light tilted his head to one side. "I think," he said slowly, "that you have a serious problem and whoever this 'Kira' is, they're right to avoid you."

He could see in L's expression a very clear look of bemusement at his denial, and gathered that, as before, L could see something in his perfectly charming face that gave him away. It had clearly been too long since he'd played with L face to face. "Sayu! Bring duct tape!"

There were occasions when L's thoughts were as visible to Light as if they were blinking above his head in foot-high neon. This was one of them, and L's thought was: *It is beneath my dignity to run away from two prepubescent children.*

"And mom's makeup!"

... *it is not beneath my dignity.*

"He's running, Sayu. Isn't this *fun* ?"

"Silly Kenji-san," she said brightly. Light pitied the idiot who tried to date her after he'd warped her childhood like this. Poor sweet Sayu. He'd have no qualms setting her on Mello, mafia brat or not. So long as he could make sure she did it correctly with minimal danger to herself, he'd be happy to see Mihael torn to pieces by his former captive.

"I'm going to count to ten, and then we're going after him. Okay? One... two..."

Ryuk's cackles had been reduced to a hoarse wheezing that meant if the shinigami were a physical entity he would have died fifteen minutes ago, and if not, at the very least wouldn't be able to speak for a couple of days without excruciating pain. Light distinctly heard

him mumble 'you' and 'evil'. There might even have been a 'poor L' in there, except Ryuk knew as well as Light did that the game they played was one they had devised between them and played willingly.

"... Nine... ten! Ready or not, here we come!"

*justkillhim*

Shut. Up.

---

Sayu found him. Unfortunately, she found him in the kitchen and L was nothing if not extremely educated in the desires of children. He bribed her with cake.

Light scowled at her. "Traitor."

She had the grace to look upset. Too upset, which meant he had to walk over and hug her until she stopped sniffing, unwilling, or maybe simply incapable of witnessing her crying for the sake of L .

L watched them and Light watched L over Sayu's head and swore death and destruction if he ever tried to use the display of emotion against him. Perhaps L took the hint, because he said only, "Would Light-kun like some cake?"

*Light-kun would like to choke you with it.*

There was too much fury, too much anger - *you and your pathetic little shadows, you you you, always hunting me. Hunting. Me, as if you could win .*

Light closed his eyes briefly and remembered that he was a child that had never murdered anyone and was most certainly not being hunted by a more than slightly crazy detective. He opened his eyes again. "I think Kenji-san would like it more," he said with barely strained amiability. He watched L's smile tilt as he mentally added another point to his Kira-score. He could even work out the likely

thought process behind it, which was more than slightly irritating after ten years trying to teach himself to stop.

"Would Light-kun like something else instead?" L offered, the gleam of 'I must make you suffer' persistence in his eyes. Light held back on the 'are you retarded?' stare he used to give the back of the man's head.

Light had decided, in L's months-long absence, to pare his twenty rules regarding L interaction down to three. Rule number one was to always divert if possible. Rule number two was, if diversion was impossible, obliviousness wasn't. And rule number three said that if he couldn't divert L's attention and even his best attempts at innocuousness were only making him even more suspicious, then provoking an argument and giving him the silent treatment would at least only give him one chance to add another point.

Light resigned himself grimly to a staring match.

---

Sachiko knew something was wrong even before Kenji staggered past her with a blank-eyed look of horror, halfway down the street before Soichiro even realised he was there. It was in the air, in the way she couldn't stop her hands shaking. So it was going to be tonight. She had suspected, although - unlike her son - she hoped she was wrong.

"I think Sayu might have traumatised him by playing dolls with him," she offered quietly when Soichiro stopped next to her and gave her a puzzled glance. Probably at Light's behest, she added in her mind.

With the rest of her family settled down and drifting off to sleep, she told herself to get it over with and stopped outside Light's room, telling herself that being afraid was absolutely ridiculous. It had to happen eventually; she couldn't pretend forever.

"May I come in?" she said quietly, hands clasped tightly as she stared at his back. He straightened slightly, and she stared at his soft

hair as if she could see the wheels and metal traps working beneath it.

"Okay," he said after a moment, and turned to face her when she stepped inside the doorway and stopped. She wished he hadn't. This was going to be hard enough.

"Was there something wrong with the babysitter?" she asked softly, watching him carefully.

"Sayu decided she needed to practise makeup on a living model, that's all," he explained guilelessly, looking relaxed and unconcerned. It had been a long time, Sachiko thought, since he'd worried about being obvious in front of her. "Sorry," he added after a moment, pretending to only just remember that she probably wouldn't be overjoyed at the waste of her cosmetics. "I made her clean it up though."

"That isn't what I meant."

He frowned, something twisting in his expression as he looked at her again, as if to reassess something he was too used to dismissing.

"What I mean is... he really got to you, didn't he?"

Light stared blankly, only the slightest hint on his face of the frown he wanted to give. "I don't understand," he said carefully, and if he were any other child and she any other mother she might have been convinced by his show of confusion.

She took a deep breath. "He wasn't really a babysitter, was he? He has something to do with you, with your... work." The look of dawning realisation on Light's face, the stirring of the creature beginning to shine through the suddenly thin mask made her take a step back. She forced herself to continue. "Isn't that so... Kira?"

## Chapter 9

However much Light might have wished it, L was not traumatised. He had simply decided after five minutes that Sachiko and Soichiro were probably used to babysitters running away from their home, and thus he could easily avoid Soichiro in a manner that didn't rouse his suspicion.

Although, if Sayu had managed to go through with the threat of the mascara, he had to confess that he might have broken. Not least because she probably would have blinded him and he rather needed his sight. He wondered how a couple so perfectly normal as Soichiro and Sachiko had managed to spawn not one, but *two* of the most demonic beings he'd ever had the misfortune to meet.

On the other hand, he was going to savour the look of horrified recognition from Light for the rest of his life. Even Watari's ban on cheesecake did very little to make him regret his course of action when he thought about that look.

The world, L had realised some time ago, was tilted on its axis, just marginally out of alignment. Not by any great amount, not really noticeable. But there was something... wrong, like the entire world had been taken apart at some point and been put back together just slightly off balance. When L thought about it, he thought about Kira.

No. Not Kira. For now Kira was still four knifelike white letters on a black background. When he thought about how there was some absence, some shadow with no creator, he thought about Yagami Light, Yagami Light and his tired eyes, slightly out of place, slightly out of time, set apart.

If L stopped to think about *why* he was so determined to prove - to himself at least - that Yagami Light was Kira, he would be forced to admit he didn't have the faintest idea. When L thought about the boy he found it difficult to see him as he was - a twelve year old child, still

plump-cheeked with baby fat, head looking slightly too big for his body - instead of the young man he would be, confident and sharp-eyed, and so, so dangerous.

He *knew* Light was Kira. It felt true, it felt like a well-worn fact, like knowing the Moors Murderers were Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, like knowing the symptoms of arsenic poisoning, like knowing - well, not his own name, because even in his head he referred to himself as 'L' - but like knowing the names of every person who could conceivably end up working under him in an investigation.

" *Let's catch Kira together,*" a voice said to him sometimes, when he was nearing unconsciousness because of sleep deprivation. It sounded like someone he *knew*, yet he didn't recognise it. It was something somebody had said to him, yet he didn't remember any such incident.

He didn't dismiss it simply because it made no sense. Many of L's cases fell into place with the tiniest of incidents, things easily overlooked, seemingly unconnected. When it came to his work, everything was to be regarded as significant, at the risk of missing something that might help, that might at long last fill the gap in his knowledge of when and where and why and how and who. Eventually everything could be put into place, the most disconnected, the most bizarre or useless things could be found to fit the puzzle.

The criminals were terrified of Kira - fifth of November - shinigami - heart attacks - Kira Kira Kira. Light and his slight self-contained smile.

L used to think that the thing about Kira was that it was a little like searching for the truth when the truth was the sun - there was no way to look at it straight-on, its reflection was the best you could hope for, so you spent years looking for the purest mirror you could find. So Kira slipped in and out of his vision at the corner of his eyes, a glimpse of the sun in a muddy puddle, until he saw Yagami Soichiro's son.

L smiled in a way that Light would recognise and fear. Something as bright and impossible as Yagami Light couldn't keep itself hidden forever.

He thought of the fury and discomfort on his face, so close to breaking out of character L could taste the truth on his tongue, could see those four knife-bladed letters over his head, and he started laughing and couldn't stop.

---

It had been a good evening. Sachiko realised, with some resignation, that she hadn't expected it to end well anyway.

Sachiko looked at Light where he sat, head bowed, fists clenched, shaking slightly, face pale with - fear? Anger? Affront? Her child. He looked like a scared child, and the only thing that gave him away now, as always, were his eyes - cold and blank as untouched snow, thoughts rushing beneath the stillness. How do I escape, how do I use this, what can I do, what do I say.

Sachiko wondered if she could touch him, if he would let her. She wanted to hold him the way she had when he was baby, his head against her heart, the steady thump that had been better for Light than any lullaby. It had never done a thing for Sayu, who grizzled until she started to sing.

"Light," she said gently, as she would to an injured animal, too wounded to move yet desperate enough to try, "I've always known. Don't bother lying to me now."

He looked up at her then and she saw that he wasn't afraid at all, he was *furious*, and suddenly she didn't want to touch him at all. It was like seeing lightning strike out of a clear sky and Sachiko felt her hands clasp together, her back curve as she bowed before it instinctively, those eyes -

She watched it disappear in the instant following her reaction, saw him - this little god, little demon - look at her with an expression close

to contempt, a dismissive understanding that she had no idea of the shape of his world. She felt as if he'd taken her heart between his hands and stopped midway into eating it because he suddenly realised she wasn't worth the honour.

He licked his lips, once, twice, tried to speak and couldn't and looked away again, face narrowed with concentration.

Sachiko let him consider the situation and tried her hardest to avoid thinking of what he might do if this had been the wrong thing to do, tried not to think of Light's invisible guard, Light's shinigami.

"Light," she said quietly, when she was beginning to jump at the slightest sound in the silent house, when she could no longer stop herself from trying to imagine what a death god might look like. "This is not going to go away. I'm always going to know, and you can't avoid this. Talk to me."

Light watched her, dark eyes intent on her face, and then he threw his head back and laughed. He laughed for a long time.

"Okay then," he said abruptly, suddenly as serious as he had been hysterical. "Let's talk."

---

When Light had wondered about the source of his intelligence, his mother had never been high on his list. Her life was so very small, so centred on her family. For Light, who thought in terms of the world and everything in it, for whom family had never been the great deal it was portrayed to be, merely a necessary obligation that he fulfilled out of the desire to maintain his illusion of perfection, the thought of being happy in such conditions was anathema. He couldn't understand it in the slightest, how happy she was, why she wouldn't fight to be more, have more, why she was content with her neat home and two children.

Twelve years without megalomania had taught him a few things, made it possible for him to see her without thinking of how he ought



to react to preserve his cover, how to make the best use of her if he had to, how he could kill her if he had to. It occurred to Light when he was four, watching her hum as she cleaned, that he had never really been happy in his life; even when he thought he had been, happiness had been a mirage wavering in the distance. And his mother - she was happy. In her tiny insignificant little world, she managed to be happy.

Light wondered if it was the same as the fleeting moments he'd had chained to L. Unaware of himself as Kira, unaware of the huge responsibility he'd taken upon himself, and made alive by something that finally made him use his starved intelligence - yes, he thought he might have been happy then, in the rare moments when L didn't say anything.

It had been a hard blow to learn that she was capable of happiness and he wasn't. It was even harder to realise that he'd managed to underestimate her badly. Very badly. One of his primary caretakers, someone he needed to be aware of at all times. If he had the capability, he'd be ashamed of himself.

Since he didn't have the capability, he spoke. "You've told no one?" he said warily, watching for the slightest hint of a lie on her face.

Sachiko - forget 'mother', she'd earned the right to be considered outside of her contribution to her family - smiled wanly. "You don't think much of me, do you?" she said softly.

He owed her honesty, he supposed, as well as his respect. No, Light never owed anyone anything. He'd just never been able to talk to anyone other than Ryuk honestly. He opened his hands so that his palms were visible, something Aiber had once told him was a signal of openness. Women, Aiber was prone to rhapsodising, were much better than men at reading body language. It took much more training matching the body's language to the verbal lies to fool a woman. Light had been utterly bemused by Aiber's assertion. Women were so easy .

"No," he said simply, and watched her flinch as she read the truth in his voice and body.

"That's where you fail," she said, with a briskness that didn't disguise her hurt. "When you think too little of the people you're trying to fool."

Light grinned at her - she recoiled, so he supposed he must have 'unintentionally' given her what Ryuk called one of his Kira smiles. "I don't need to be told that. Do you mean to become my coach?" He wanted to hurt, he wanted her to *go away*, to let him pretend she still knew nothing, she was still nothing.

Sachiko narrowed her eyes in a way that made Ryuk suck in a breath with a startled noise of recognition. "I don't know what you are-"

Absurdly, Light found himself having to fight not to flinch.

"-but you are still my son, and I am still your mother. It is a mother's duty to protect her child."

Light stared at her, unable to understand in the slightest what she meant. He looked at Ryuk. "Humans," the shinigami said, as if that explained everything. Sadly, it did.

"Ryuk?" Sachiko queried, an edge still audible in her voice. She smiled when Light swung his head back to face her, surprise visible for a microsecond. "I am not as stupid as you think I am." She sighed, reached forward and stroked his hair, ignoring the way he froze under her touch. "You're so used to ignoring me, you don't realise how much you let me see. Unless of course, subconsciously you've wanted me to know all along?"

Light shook his head mutely, though it was not a denial of her question, more a startled expression of awe at how much he'd managed to miss. "You," he said with something as close to honesty as he knew after so many years hiding himself, "are incredible. I have spies less observant than you."

Ryuk laughed, and Light reached up a hand offhandedly to swat him, as he would if they were alone in the room. He watched his mother, the way she watched him - hands clasped before her, expression bland. It reminded him of a woman named Maria, one of his German Voices - the way she had reacted to Takeshi and his proposal, carefully weighing up the advantages and disadvantages while doing her best to appear harmless. A stranger would have thought her stupid, and even Takeshi had told him later that he didn't think Maria had the type of character required for the work. Light had told him not to question orders. Sachiko, he realised now, was revealing exactly that same edge to him in exchange for forcing him into the open. How unnecessarily fair of her.

"May I meet Ryuk?" She said politely, bowing her head slightly, making it look like she conceded to Light, as if he were the one in control when she had destroyed the gossamer-thin falsehoods that kept them happy.

Light considered it. To show her Ryuk might intimidate her. It might make her aware of the irrevocable nature of her decision. It might be nice to be able to give Ryuk's opinions and information without playing interpreter. It was difficult to ignore Ryuk, difficult to pretend a seven-foot shinigami didn't exist when it was dancing in midair *right in front of you* or saying ridiculous, funny things. "Get an apple," he said, and watched her nod and leave.

He looked at Ryuk. "Want to talk to my mother?" he said curiously, as if he had any intention of doing what Ryuk suggested. Ryuk flipped himself upside down and stood on the ceiling. "Was that meant to be a 'yes'?" Light said.

"Yeah," Ryuk said, in his special *no, duh* voice. Which Light was reasonably sure he'd gotten from him anyway. It didn't affect his response, but it might have had something to do with tone it was delivered in:

"Tough luck."

"Wha-?"

"You don't give away any more than you need to."

"But-"

"She'll know you're there, that ought to be enough." Light scowled up at him. "Don't even *think* about 'accidentally' touching her with a piece of your Death Note."

"I-"

"And don't lie to me."

"Wasn't," Ryuk muttered resentfully.

"You were about to."

"Wasn't."

A soft cough alerted him to his mother's presence in the room, apple held tight in one hand. He offered it up to Ryuk indifferently, mouth twitching only slightly when he heard Sachiko's gasp as chunks of apple vanished into thin air.

"Ryuk is quite addicted," he said placidly, watching her carefully.

"I know," she said instantly, and he swallowed back a smile.

"Do you?"

She looked momentarily abashed. "You used to speak of him when you were a toddler. I thought - I thought at first that he was your invisible friend."

"Well, he's invisible," Light agreed, "but 'friend' might be pushing it. Eat the core too," he ordered when Ryuk looked like he was going to leave it.

"I'm desperate enough right now that I'd eat only the cores if that was all that was available," Ryuk muttered, plucking the apple core from Light's hand and flinging it absently into his mouth, twisting half his body impossibly to keep his feet on the ceiling and his head in a position where gravity did the work for him.

Sachiko knelt on the floor, hands on her knees, staring up at the ceiling where the apple had disappeared. Light wondered if she was going to clap three times and press her forehead against the floor in obeisance. "L," he said, forcing her attention away from the impossibility she'd just seen, distracting her from asking again about Ryuk.

"Forgive me," she said in a distracted voice, gaze flicking constantly back to the ceiling where Ryuk no longer stood. "I don't understand."

"No?" Light said encouragingly, letting her read into it what she would, fill the silence with her own thoughts. "You tried to research me, didn't you, when you realised?"

Sachiko nodded mutely. Light settled back in his chair, palms open on his knees, body relaxed. "L is one of the world's greatest detectives." He considered that statement, decided against elaborating, decided in favour of simplifying, and continued. "He and I vie for the right to call ourselves as such. The man you invited here to watch us, that was L."

"That is... a problem?"

Light didn't think he'd ever quite understood the extent of a 'blind rage' before, thoughts tumbling into and against each other, so fast he could barely distinguish them - it was like touching the Death Note again and feeling those lost pieces of himself force themselves into what used to be their places even though they no longer fitted quite right.

"It is a problem," he said flatly, after telling himself that just because she knew he was Kira didn't mean she understood at all what that

really meant. "But not yours. I can deal with him."

Head resting on his shoulder, Ryuk gave the sort of laugh he used when watching humans die.

"As you say," she said, even as her shoulders pulled back, retreated, saying 'I'm afraid', as her face stilled and said 'I don't understand', her hands wrung together, nails digging into flesh, and said 'that sounds far more ominous than it should.'

He smiled at her with all the gentleness and understanding he possessed. She stood and asked him quietly if they could continue the conversation tomorrow, which was exactly what he'd hoped for. He watched her go, and pitied her, and thought about how to use her.

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"Gonna kill her?" Ryuk asked, staring at the closed door.

"If I can refrain from killing L," Light said with exaggerated patience, "I can almost certainly refrain from killing my own mother."

Ryuk sniggered. "I like the way you say that, like it's a perfectly normal response to something." He grinned nastily at Light's insulted expression. "Whatever happened to that vicious little bastard who'd kill his own family if he had to?"

"He grew up. Besides, I'm supposed to be dependent, awkward questions would probably be asked and I'd have to wait until things slowed down before making an escape. With L hanging around, being able to leave at a moment's notice is essential."

"Are we planning to leave?" Ryuk said, puzzled, as if the months Light had spent drawing up plans to stave off the worry of L's inaction had completely passed him by.

"We', Ryuk?"

"Eighteen years and you *still* don't know how this possessing thing works?" Ryuk said snidely.

"... Tell me it hasn't really been that long."

"Well... maybe take a few months for that time you lost your memories..."

"Wait. Wait. Let me think. I picked up the Death Note on the... 28th of November 2003. I died on the 28th of January 2010. That's... six years, two months. I'm twelve years old now... oh god, you're right!"

"Hey, there's no need to sound like *that* about it."

Light shuddered. For the first time he realised the full extent of the horror of having Ryuk watch him for the rest of his life. He already doubted there was a time before Ryuk; soon he wouldn't be able to remember that not everybody was cursed with an invisible shinigami companion, that he was in a club of one. Or six, if other shinigami got Ryuk's type of restless. He sneezed.

"... Bless you...?" Ryuk said awkwardly, unable to remember the proper response to a sneeze. The minutiae of human interaction had typically passed him by, even after so long bound to a human. Couple of centuries and he'd only have to forget again.

Light waved a hand dismissively. "Ryuk, my faithless friend, I think we have several choices here, depending on L's... persistence. There can be a kidnap and murder-"

"And murder? Not just kidnap?"

"No, because if L thinks I'm still alive he won't rest until he's found me. We can try warning him off - I think the brats would be good for that, don't you?"

"Heh." Ryuk rather enjoyed Light's rants on 'the brats'; they hadn't become boring yet because every time he brought them up Light

added some new reason they were worthy only of humiliating deaths and having their corpses left in a room full of necrophiliacs. Which of course had nothing to do with the fact that they'd managed to best him. At all. Why would Ryuk ever think that?

"L will definitely leave if his 'successors' are threatened, right?"

"... Yeah?"

"So..." Light looked at him, encouraged him mentally to connect the dots. "Isn't it obvious?"

"... No?"

"... I'm sorely tempted to give you another apple just to see if it does anything for your brain."

"Yeah?" There was a spark of hope in Ryuk's expression, which was a pity, because there was nothing Light liked more than to extinguish an opponent's hope.

"Unfortunately for you, my grudges last a lot longer than my pity."

"Oh." Ryuk pouted. Light grinned at him.

"We could make use of mother," he mused, deliberately turning away from the thought of the brats.

Ryuk's smile had far too many sharp teeth in it, even for him. "And if she 'happens' to be killed discharging her duties?"

"Ryuk!" Light pressed a hand to his heart, his face blank above the theatrical gesture. "When have I ever knowingly let my agents die on the job?"

"Jeeze." Ryuk said, staring at Light's bleak smile. "You really could still kill them if you had to."



Light turned away, thinking it over. "I won't have to. But... Yes, I think I could."

"You *think* ?" Ryuk goaded. "Or you know?"

Light turned back to look at him, and Ryuk recognised Kira's cold dead eyes, although he hadn't seen them in a long time. "I know I could."

Ryuk opened and closed his mouth wordlessly, seeking the right tongue to express his thoughts in. He shook his head. "Wow. Just wow."

"What? *What*? You'd do the same."

"Well yeah, but one - shinigami. And two - they're not *my* family."

Light shrugged. "I won't have to," he said firmly.

Ryuk decently refrained from telling him that was what he'd said about his father. He wasn't giving up his scarcely regained apples just to give Light an unpleasant and unlikely to be heeded truth. He wondered if he should tell Light that it had been decided that deaths indirectly connected to his actions didn't count against him so long as they occurred in such a way that there was absolutely nothing to be done to prevent them from happening. He shrugged. Light wouldn't try anywhere near as hard if he knew. So Ryuk just let him fly blind. It was far more entertaining.

"Hey Light," he said, reaching past him to tap at the computer monitor. "Don't you have a case to work on?"

From the way Light's head hit the keyboard with a frustrated groan, Ryuk assumed the answer was 'yes'.

## Chapter 10

Light knew he was dreaming the moment he saw Near sitting on the floor, one knee brought up, the other leg folded beneath him. He felt his heart sink with the inevitability of it as he met Near's dark eyes. Of course he'd dream of this after his mother finally admitted she'd known all along. (Why could he never dream of better things? The moments he'd found that resembled other people's happiness? He'd even prefer L to this.)

"You're nothing but a murderer," Near said, and no matter how many times he heard it, Light still wanted to wring his hypocritical little neck. *And what does that make you, overseeing my death for disagreeing with your worldview?*

He tried to laugh and found he was only capable of managing a kind of staggered gasping. Well, they were all hypocrites in this farce. Some of them had just been slightly more honest about it than others.

"Since you were born, have you ever told the truth even once?" L asked from somewhere in the dark behind him.

*Sure, L . I'll tell you the truth now - I don't want to die. This is pathetic. I don't want to die, I don't want to leave the name L in the hands of that pitiful little child who isn't equal to even half of you. Happy? Now why don't you return the favour?*

It was so hard to breathe. It shouldn't be so hard; he'd been doing it without effort for nearly twenty-four years. He blinked, watched as L walked past and turned to stand over him. When had he fallen to the floor?

Damn Near. It wasn't right, that it should end like this - Near wasn't right, he was just - just - *unworthy* . L *technically* wasn't worthy either because when you kill someone in such a way that the words

'victory', 'success' or 'mwahahaha!' are automatic, the recipient of the finely orchestrated death immediately loses their status of 'worthy opponent'. But still...

It was kind of nice, Light supposed. L, watching, waiting for him to die. So it was a hallucination caused by blood loss and trauma, what the hell. He wasn't going to die alone, he was going to go watched by the one human he could stand, the closest thing to a friend he'd ever had in his short life. It was either nice or pathetic, and since he much preferred dying under L's eyes than Near's, it wasn't very difficult to choose.

This hadn't happened. He'd died an ugly undignified death watched by Near and his team with Ryuk before him, writing his name like he'd promised so long ago. Hadn't he? He couldn't remember any more, he'd dreamed this so often.

He looked at L, smiling - he'd never seen L smile like that before, ugly and awkward and honest. It felt like an inexpressibly pitiable thing, the realisation that only when dead could they think of smiling and meaning it. He licked his lips and tried to smile back without resentment, tasting salt on his tongue.

His heart -- his heart was - the thought might have made him laugh in better circumstances. What a way to learn you had one - feeling it give out inside you. It hurt, it *hurt*, like seeing Sayu's eyes after Mello had let her go, like watching L fall and realising it was over, realising all the time, all the plans and the endless struggle and it all came down to this - one man, one maybe-friend falling off his chair and into his enemy's arms.

"Was it all you imagined?" L said with mild curiosity, watching as he struggled against his failing body. "Light?"

*I don't want to die!* He begged, but there was so much blood, and L's eyes were so dark, and dying was the only thing left to do.

"Light? *Light?* "

Light struggled free of the bedcovers, gasping for air he didn't need as badly as he thought, one hand pressed tight against his chest, feeling the reassuring thumping of his heart. How incredible it was, how utterly amazing and mundane.

Ryuk looked at him from where he sat cross-legged in the air, the Death Note open in his hands. "Light?" he repeated, his voice lilting as he stretched the name out the way he always did when curious or bemused.

"I'm not dead," Light whispered desperately between gasps, as if he had to share the wonder and horror of it. "I'm not dead, I'm not dead, I'mnotdead--"

Ryuk closed the notebook and replaced it on his belt, studying Light carefully as if he could part him from his panic with his coldly amused gaze. Treating this as something exceptional would only make Light feel humiliated once he was back to normal. It didn't pay to treat Light as if he were a child. Or a human. "You've been waking up not-dead for the past twelve years, Light," he pointed out. "It should have sunk in by now."

"Haah," Light managed, hunching over, feeling the rapid beating against his palm gradually slow to a more sedate pace. He made another noise, somewhere between a laugh and sob and twice as pathetic as either. He looked up at Ryuk. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Ryuk contemplated asking what for, before reminding himself that a thank you from Light that had nothing to do with social niceties was about as rare as a black polar bear and should be treated accordingly. "No problem," he said with false airiness, and watched as Light regained enough control to at least look as if he hadn't been so very close to screaming.

Ryuk leant down casually and dropped a hand against Light's shoulder, grinning at the fine tremors he could feel running through

his favourite human's body. Light knocked his hand away fiercely and Ryuk backed away, palms up as he laughed.

He remembered when Light was an infant and would wake up screaming - not as normal human babies did, easily soothed by milk and mother, but the way he had in the Warehouse, filled with fear and fury and desperation. Ryuk had always loved it when he did that, when he knew Light was screaming in his crib from the memory of pain and death because it meant his prideful, foolish Light was really there inside that wriggly pink flesh bag. He'd always been amused to see Light wailing like he'd never been the flawless supremely self-controlled monster of Ryuk's acquaintance and after a year or so he'd noticed it was his laughter that inevitably made Light settle.

Light was one screwed up mess. Ryuk wouldn't have him any other way.

"Sweet dreams, Light?" he asked innocently.

Light looked at him with eyes blank enough to rival L's. "The sweetest," he said. Ryuk kinda thought Light didn't know how to tell the truth any more.

"Good to hear," Ryuk said, settling on the bed beside him to watch the dawn. "Want to play a game with me?"

"A game?" Light said absently, fingers prodding briefly everywhere a bullet had once hit.

"Yeah. It's an old shinigami game. Before, y'know, the rot set in. You pick a human, and then you detail the most absurd and convoluted way you can think of to kill them, going as close as possible to automatic heart attack territory without actually crossing the line. It's called--" he paused, stretched for the shinigami word and found he couldn't find it. "Huh. I've forgotten its name."

"Haven't we played this before?" Light mused, inadvertently betraying his interest by straightening up a little.

Ryuk was ever so slightly proud that Light trusted him enough not to bother keeping a tight reign on his body language. He thought about that for a moment and decided he ought to feel ashamed. He tried it out for a minute and decided shinigami pride had never given him any good fun anyway. "Maybe," he said. "I don't think you knew it was a game though."

Light smiled wanly, pretending not to understand how Ryuk was carefully pulling him back from the edge his memories pushed him towards. "Okay."

Ryuk grinned back, prepared to give the impression he cared about Light's fragile grip on sanity for the sake of ideas. Light had taught him so much.

---

The box from Kira arrived two days after the Babysitting Incident.

L never liked to think of the purpose behind Wammy's House. It... irritated him. Vexed him. *Insulted* him. The very idea that L could be bested, or that there were children capable of equalling him - it made him laugh. He understood, intellectually, that it was possible but that didn't make him *like* the idea.

The first time L went back to Wammy's after becoming a full-time detective was when he received a call from Roger about a strange gift proclaiming to be from 'Kira'. He continued to go back every so often because it pleased Watari to believe L was being sensible and accepting his mortality and his limits. If Watari chose not to notice that they tended to visit at times with a statistically higher chance of a gift arriving from Kira, or that L never once spoke to the children in the orphanage - well, that was his problem.

He looked at the box on the floor again, nudging it disdainfully with a foot. A bar of plain chocolate, a puzzle made entirely of plain white pieces, the newest gaming system... It had taken him far longer than Watari probably believed it should to work out Kira was talking about Wammy's House orphans, seven year old 'Near' and nine year old

'Mello' in particular, given the prominence afforded to their 'gifts'. He understood - for once - the intent, but he just couldn't understand why Kira thought they were important enough to him to try and threaten him with. They might turn out to be adequate detectives, but currently they were just children of above average intelligence and hardly a solid bet for the next L.

He would have to pay attention to Mello and Near now, if only to see whether or not they upheld the promise Kira clearly saw in them. Watari would be so pleased.

He felt... just a little insulted.

Okay, so a lot insulted.

The only thing that alleviated his mood was the understanding that for Kira to misstep as obviously as he had, L must have hit closer to home than even he had realised. So close Kira (Yagami, most definitely Yagami now, with this little nail) felt the need to try and warn him off so heavy-handedly.

He hated the reminder of the eternal insult of his 'heirs', he hated the thought that if L were removed Kira really thought they would be worth his time, but he liked that Kira could show himself so obviously, be so unsettled as to act first without thinking for the first time in L's experience.

For months to have passed without interaction between L and Kira, then for this to arrive so soon after L invaded Yagami Light's home turf? Coincidence did not even begin to cover it, and if Yagami had been thinking properly he would have known it was as good as a confession.

*" Are you afraid of Kira?"*

Ogasawara Yuichi was a murderer who had baffled his local police force with contradictions. He killed in a frenzy, yet took great care to try and remove any trace of himself from the scene. He got close to

his victims, yet they were all strangers to him. And when he spoke to L, it was five minutes before anyone realised that when he talked about gods and demons and hungry prideful spirits he was talking about Kira, at which point L insisted he be allowed to interrogate him privately.

"Are you afraid of Kira?" Yuichi had asked, twisting and tugging at his handcuffed wrists, trying awkwardly to angle his body so that his face could be concealed.

L had expressed his contempt of such a thing.

"You ought to be scared," Yuichi had insisted. "You most of all. Don't you know he hates you?"

"..."

"A face and a name to put with it. That's all he needs. And if you do something wrong..."

"Kira is a detective," L had said, though something savage and vindicated had uncurled low in his gut.

"See you're just like the rest," Ogasawara had said, fierce and slightly unhinged. "You don't get it at all. Kira is judgement, not justice."

Judgement, not justice. Something itched in the back of L's mind, like the scratching of pen on paper, scribbling something out. He thought about the harsh strokes of Kira's name, brilliant white against a black background, and the way Kira said his name like it was more than just a single-letter moniker.

When Kira spoke his name L remembered that it was also the name of the suicide capsule used by secret agents in World War Two, the infamous cyanide L-pill. The pill took fifteen minutes to work and caused an agonisingly painful death via asphyxiation; it was never used - agents preferred capture and torture with the hope of escape



over a certain death. On his more morbid days, L sometimes thought of his job - of being L - as the captivity, the torture and the slow death all in one.

L was poison in Kira's mouth and he wondered how long it would be before it killed him. The thought probably shouldn't have made him smile as much it did.

He ate Mello's chocolate bar with relish as he thought about confronting Light again.

---

When Sachiko was six years old, she'd wanted to be a policewoman, a nurse, a teacher. The idea of helping people had appealed to her. She wasn't stupid, she knew she'd have to work hard, and she was determined to fly as her mother - a World War Two child, worn and cynical, bitter and afraid - never had the chance to do. Whenever Sachiko insisted she was going to be a career woman, her mother laughed and told her not to dream, that it only brought disappointment.

Right up until she met Soichiro, Sachiko clung to idea of a career with all her strength, conceding to her parents only in its direction. Soichiro didn't sweep her off her feet, he wasn't her Prince Charming. He was something solid; she knew he would always be there. She realised she was never going to be special, but she would be safe with him, she would be happy, if she stopped dreaming. So she did, until the day the nurse had laid her son upon her breast.

( *Kami*, she said, and the baby looked at her - nameless and yet not, because something whispered *Light* in her ear in a voice that made her think of the gods that greeted you at the end of the road.)

Sachiko learned to be content to care for her children and her home. She gave up defining herself as anything other than *wife* or *mother*, but Light made her dream, made her start to think outside of the bounds of her world.

Then Light had turned out not to be the perfect son she'd imagined, and even *mother* had to be unlearned. He'd always had night terrors, and she never tried to comfort him after he turned three, learned to sleep through his screams the way Soichiro did, believing she would know what to do and how to comfort Light. He walked through the house like a ghost, and she never did anything in particular to welcome him, never allowed herself to let down her guard and meet his eyes in case he saw her knowledge of his abnormality there.

Silence was a hard habit to break. She was so used to pretending Light was normal - that he didn't exist unless he was playing normal - that she felt curiously weightless now that the secrecy was gone, she couldn't figure out how she was meant to act now. Suddenly she didn't have to pretend she was blind, deaf and dumb. The change was - disorientating. She'd been *wifemotherhousekeeper* for so long she didn't know what to be, now that she had to be something else. (What did Light need from her? He'd done just fine without a mother thus far.)

So she followed old patterns in a new fashion, went into the kitchen and started preparing one of Light's favourite dishes - the first time she'd ever done such a thing solely for her son - and started to think hard about her options.

Light probably didn't *want* a mother, but he needed human connection. Kira would probably want a servant, and she knew how to be that, but that wouldn't help anything in the long term - anybody could be a servant as far as Kira was concerned, that was just the way his kind were with humans. She needed to create a place within Light's life that would be professional enough to allow him to be open with her, personal enough that she could influence him. It unnerved her to think that his two worlds would meet in her; perhaps that was why Light looked at her as if she had betrayed him by being observant.

A piece of paper brushed her hand and she frowned at it, bemused, because she could have sworn that all her cookbooks were on the

shelves where they should be, that she hadn't brought any down to look for a recipe...

She looked up and sucked in a breath, biting hard on her lower lip to stop herself screaming.

"Hiya," the monster said, black lips stretching and parting to reveal uncomfortably long sharp teeth. Silver jewellery rattled as it reached out one clawed hand and plucked the knife from her nerveless fingers. "Wouldn't want ya to damage yourself," it said, pushing the blade curiously into its hand for safekeeping and then staring at it as if it couldn't quite understand why humans made such a fuss about such things.

Sachiko concentrated very hard on not hyperventilating.

"Damn," the shinigami said - and really what else could it be, she found herself thinking, suddenly astonished at her own surprise - looking at her face. "You aren't going to bleed to death from that are you?" it said worriedly, looking at her chewed open lip. "You humans, you break so easily, one little tear in your skin and it's all over."

"We're not quite that fragile, Ryuk-san," Sachiko managed after a moment, and reached up mechanically to wipe away the blood beginning to trickle down her chin.

"Oh good," the shinigami said with obvious relief, combing its claws inattentively through the feathers in its shoulders, as if to neaten up. She didn't think that was something he normally did - all the leather and chains and messy hair, he made her think just a little of the rock stars Sayu was so into at the moment. She wondered if it was something he'd picked up from Light, who was always neat and well presented. "'Cause Light would kill me." He paused. "Okay, so he wouldn't kill me. He'd probably give it a damn good try, though."

"Ah," Sachiko said faintly, and leaned heavily against the kitchen worktop.

"I mean, there's only two - oh wait, three ways to kill a shinigami, and the first one isn't something I'm going to worry about, the second is for idiots, and the third is... is... well, who is going to kill a human with their own hands, I ask you?"

"I can't say I have any idea," Sachiko said.

"So it's not like he can actually *do* anything, but you never know with Light, he's a little-"

"Ryuk-san," Sachiko interrupted. "I thought Light said I wasn't to meet you?"

"What Light doesn't know won't hurt him. Probably. It won't hurt *me*, anyway, and that's the important bit."

Ryuk looked absurdly proud of himself, as if there was some great triumph to be found in going against her twelve-year-old son's wishes. Perhaps there was. "When you say 'probably'," she said slowly, carefully reaching out and pulling her best kitchen knife from his left hand, "what do you mean by that?"

Ryuk blinked at her. "Light... likes to complicate things," he said vaguely. "Also: paranoid. Very paranoid. Has to be aware of absolutely everything. You oughta do something about that."

"Yes," Sachiko said after a moment, simply to acknowledge that something had been said. "Ryuk-san, how long have you watched my son?"

"A long time." Ryuk said, flexing the fingers on his now knife-free hand, the flesh closing before her eyes. She wondered, a little hysterically, if it was sanitary to prepare food with utensils that had been in a shinigami's flesh. "Longer than you'd think."

"I think you've been watching him since that day he was born," she said quietly, holding the kitchen knife meaningfully close to the hand

reaching for the nearest apple piece. "How exactly could you have been watching him for longer than I think?"

"You'd be surprised," Ryuk said brightly, moving away from her (or the knife at least) with studied casualness. "You'd also be surprised if you knew what Light could do with a pen."

"Ryuk-san, I'm afraid you're not making any sense."

The shinigami made a hoarse cackling noise that had to be called laughter because there was no other word for it. "Course not. I get all twisted up without my apples.... Brain included, although Light would say it's naturally twisted..."

"Poor dear," she said mildly. He stared at her as if trying hard to decide if she meant to be sarcastic or not and she imagined Light in her place, carelessly needling this creature with the power over life and death. "Ryuk-san, why do you follow Light?"

"Are you *kidding*?" he demanded incredulously. "Do you have *any* idea what he can do when he puts his mind to it?"

There was no logical reason for the way her hands abruptly curled into fists, nothing she could think of to explain why she was suddenly so unsettled. Perhaps it was simply the fact that a death god was telling her this that it became so ominous. She and Soichiro had always believed, proud parents that they were, that Light could do or be anything he cared to. But to hear it from a shinigami - what would impress of god of death? Surely not something in service of human life. She didn't want to think about her child being equally capable of going in directions contrary to everything they hoped for him.

"Is he -" she struggled to express what she wanted to say, to ask this creature who knew her son better than she did. "Light. Is he a good person." She sighed in frustration, trying find the words she wanted. "I mean-"

" *Light* ." Ryuk said, an odd note in his voice. "Ah." He hunched slightly, claws tugging at the heart hanging from his ear. "Aheheh. Well, he certainly believes he's a good person," he managed after a moment, carefully without inflection. "I dunno. I'm not human, I don't understand what you want to know."

That was a cop-out if ever Sachiko heard one, his voice suddenly falling into distant, practised - *shinigami* - tones, like he hadn't just moments before been hyperactive with his almost human delight. He was lying, she thought, but she turned away and began cleaning the kitchen perfunctorily. She'd long ago learned that there were some times where the only sensible choice was to be blind. Whatever Light's fascination was for this creature, she didn't want to know it. She wondered if she was a bad mother to fear that her love for her son would not survive the revelation.

"Light is like a fire," Ryuk said after a moment. She glanced over her shoulder at him, watching his expression crease with thought. "You gotta have the right stuff to make anything of it, you know?"

"Not really," Sachiko said.

"Pft," the shinigami muttered. "I spent ages on that metaphor. You aren't even going to ask?"

"No. I don't--" she took a deep breath, turned to face him. His monstrous proportions and ever-present grin weren't quite so bad when she was prepared for them, and that made her uneasy. If she forgot what this creature was, what he could do - "I don't want to talk about Light any more."

"Alright then, Yagami Sachiko. What *would* you like to know?"

"Tell me... tell me about Kira."

"Kira?" Ryuk said softly. He smiled, yellow eyes bright in his stark black and white patterned face. "Well, that's a whole different matter, isn't it?"

He sounded utterly serious, as Kira really didn't equal Light or vice versa, and Sachiko knew that despite herself she'd asked the wrong question.

---

Light thought Ryuk was up to something. No, he decided, watching Ryuk burst into laughter for the third time that hour, over nothing - not even the barest excuse like 'Light, I remember that guy! Didn't he kill that kid he's hugging first time round?' - he *knew* Ryuk was up to something. Or had Done Something.

*I'm hunting you*, L whispered in the back of his head, and Light felt his shoulders hunch to keep the detective's voice out. Good point - he couldn't afford to be distracted with L so close, chipping away at the façade that was thinner than he'd thought it was. But Ryuk was giggling over nothing. And if that wasn't bad, Light didn't know what was.

Actually, L was. Near and Mello too, if he could bear to acknowledge their existence. His mother's plans, possibly entirely contrary to his own. His Kiras revolting against him. His identity revealed. His plans for peaceful anonymity being unravelled. Lots of things were bad. Ryuk refusing to share a joke just happened to be hitting the top of the list by virtue of the way he looked at Light out of the corner of his eye.

"Ryuk, what have you done?"

Ryuk twisted his head almost 180 degrees to look at Light without turning away from the window. If Ryuk wasn't very vocal in his delight of owls, Light would suspect him of watching too many horror movies. "Why do you always think I've done something?" he complained half-heartedly. He looked like he was holding back on the urge to crow about something, which increased Light's worry a hundredfold.

"Perhaps because I know you?"

"Perhaps because you're paranoid?" Ryuk retorted, but twisted his body round to face the same direction as his head. "Seriously, Light, I've read those little pamphlet things, paranoia is where it all starts."

Light stared at him. "Who's been giving you pamphlets on mental illness?" he demanded. "You know it isn't an instruction manual for entertainment, right?"

"Of course I do. I'm not stupid," Ryuk said.

Light raised an eyebrow.

"What?" Ryuk said. "I'm not. I just have a different value of intelligence."

"I wasn't aware you had any value of intelligence," Light said blandly.

"That's because you're incapable of empathy," Ryuk sniffed.

"I think you have the wrong concept of empathy there, Ryuk."

"No," Ryuk argued. "I'm pretty sure I've got the right one - the ability to see things from another's point of view, right?"

"I'm capable of that!" Light protested. "Hell, I'm *good* at that. Why'd you think it's so easy for me to manipulate people?"

"I think that right there explains why empathy isn't really the word for you."

Light stared at him. "I'm not getting into a moral debate with a shinigami."

"Sure," Ryuk said, pressing a hand to his forehead in a theatrical gesture. "Pull the shinigami card why don't you."

"Look," Light insisted. "We're not talking about whether or not I'm capable of empathy, all right?"



"Because you aren't," Ryuk muttered, and Light remembered just why he'd been so delighted at the idea that shinigami could be killed.

"We're *talking*," he said, valiantly ignoring the shinigami, "about what *you've* done."

Ryuk's mouth snapped shut. Warning signs started popping up all over Light's subconscious. "I didn't do nothing." Ryuk muttered.

"... I'm pretty sure you know the rules regarding double negatives, Ryuk."

"... I didn't do anything?" Ryuk corrected, without much hope that Light would accept it.

"What 'didn't' you do." Light sighed. He was reasonably sure it didn't involve L, not with Ryuk's punishment still fresh in both their minds. That was the one upside he could see to this.

"Well." Ryuk said. Caution seemed to have caught up on his earlier need to boast - he eyed Light's hands warily, and kept glancing at his face. "You know what you said about your mother..."

Light closed his eyes in horror, understanding instantly from long years of association just what Ryuk was likely to say. "*Didn't I tell you not to touch her with your Death Note?*" he demanded.

"You told me not to think about *accidentally* touching her with my Note," Ryuk corrected. "So I didn't think about it and touched her deliberately."

"... Clearly, you and I have spent far too much time around each other." Light said, too dazed to fully comprehend just what Ryuk had admitted to.

Ryuk - there was no other word for it - preened. "Thanks."

"That was not a compliment!"

"If you say 'you've ruined everything!' in that tone you usually save for 'he got me!'" Ryuk said cautiously, "I'm pretty sure it's a warning sign that I've got to call for men in white coats with letters after their name. You'll understand I'm only thinking about your mind, right?"

Light threw an apple at his head.

---

In New York, James Bryant picked up a plain black notebook.

## Chapter 11

The notebook was a joke, of course.

James Bryant couldn't have said just why he picked it up, or why he didn't throw it away after reading the first few 'rules', but it had to be a joke. He flicked through the empty notebook, noting the fine quality of the paper and wondering why someone would throw a new notebook away after writing such ridiculous things on the inside cover.

There was something about it, though. He wouldn't normally pick a book up off the street, and he'd fully intended to throw it away when he read 'the human whose name is written in this notebook will die' - seriously, that wasn't even funny - but he didn't. And he found himself just... just brushing his fingers against it constantly, as if to make sure it was there, and when he left it on his desk he found himself going back to his study again and again, as if worried it would disappear in his absence. Marie was probably wondering what was wrong with him, and what was he meant to say? 'Sorry honey, but I picked up this really weird notebook, it's supposed to kill people; you think it might be real?'

Hmph. It was just a joke. A really bizarre, sick joke.

He touched the cover again.

Obviously it was like one of those Round Robin things. One person started it by writing the rules and dropping the book, another person picked it up, wrote a name, left the book somewhere else for another person to pick up and use and so on. It was probably some office worker's idea of stress relief. Stress-relief was good, even if this type was a little morbid. Imagining your boss dead probably worked better than those squishy toys, all things considered. James quite liked his boss though, so the notebook wasn't quite the embodiment of the American Dream for him as it probably would be for someone else.

He had to write a name though. He couldn't act like he was scared of some practical joke, right? Treating this thing as if it really had the power to kill someone.... ridiculous.

The notebook stayed in his desk drawer. It was stupid to ascribe emotions to an inanimate object, but if James thought about it all - and he did, with far greater frequency than he expected - he would describe it as waiting patiently.

---

"Hey, Ryuk."

"...?"

"Man, have you been gone from the realm so long you don't even recognise your fellow shinigami any more?"

"Nah... it's not that. It's just... What are you doing here?"

"What, you think you're the only one who can have fun with humans?"

"Oh ho?"

"Ryuk?"

"Heh. Hehehahaha!"

"What's so funny?"

"Sorry, can't tell you. But don't worry, you'll figure it out soon enough."

"... Has being down here warped your brains? Should I worry about that?"

"You gotta tell me all about it, when you get the joke."

"..."

"See ya, Zellogi."

---

The first name he wrote was his mother-in-law's. He didn't know her that well - couldn't really understand what most men had against their mother-in-laws, to be honest, but he figured that was mostly because he lived at the opposite end of the country. It felt like the sort of thing your average person would write if given a notebook that killed people, that was all.

Alice was nice enough. Didn't think he was good enough for Marie, but that was pretty par for the course, wasn't it? James was never going to think anyone was good enough for his own daughter, but since Emily was six, it was going to be some time before he could fully understand that parental horror.

He forgot all about it until a few hours later, when his father-in-law rang up with the news that she'd died of a heart attack.

It was a coincidence. Had to be.

Okay, so his mother-in-law had been fit for her age. Ate healthily, went jogging, all that stuff. There might have been some underlying heart condition. Something.

Writing someone's name in book couldn't *kill* them. It was just... just bad luck. A terrible coincidence.

He looked at the notebook, so plain and ordinary - except where it said in odd writing, more like numbers than letters, *the human whose name is written in this notebook shall die*.

---

"Ryuk?"

"Yeah?"

"... smells like old cloth and pigeons in here."

"Yeah."

"... What's with the slasher smile?"

"I'm always smiling."

"Not like that, you don't."

"Aww, you can tell the difference. I'm so touched."

"Be serious."

"It's nothing to worry about, Light."

"I thought I told you to be serious?"

"I am. Trust me, it's nothing to worry about."

"Trust? You?"

"Difficult, I know."

" *Impossible* after your latest stunt."

"Admit it, I did you a favour."

"When hell freezes over."

"What are you talking about? I thought you knew what came after death."

"..."

---

He was good friends with Anna Sommerlee- they'd gone to college together, and her notes had pretty much been the reason he managed to graduate. Which was not to lessen the import of her cooking, the only reason he hadn't been living entirely on peanut butter sandwiches and ramen throughout that period of his life.

He'd thought he would marry her one day, before he met Marie and realised the difference between loving someone and being in love with someone, and even when things hadn't worked out they'd managed to remain friends. She was Emily's godmother, Marie's ally, his friend.

Annie's one big flaw was that she had absolutely godawful taste in men. Himself in college was probably proof of that. Normally it was just - 'just', that wasn't funny - that they didn't treat her the way she deserved, like someone worthy of respect, but her newest... her newest guy took the cake.

When she started being nervous about the amount of time she spent with him and the family, and explaining her odd bruises as clumsiness - Annie, who'd once wanted to be a ballerina and danced every Friday - it brought bile to his throat. All those ridiculous excuses - *what? David, hurt me? Ha, don't be silly Jamie. It was an accident, I just - fell over, is all. No no, of course it's not because of him that I'm leaving early, I'm just very busy, left a few things undone. I just don't feel like going out tonight, I'm okay, really. I'm okay.*

But it wasn't like he could do anything. He was an accountant, not a vigilante. She wouldn't thank him for making her choices for her.

But the third time she rang up in the middle of the night, sobbing, he was in his study, looking at the notebook, reading the rules for the fifteenth time that hour.

"I'm sorry," she kept saying, as if she was afraid he would yell at her for needing him, and when he heard yelling, heard her screaming--

( *The human whose name is written in this notebook shall die.* )

He just wanted her to be safe.

---

"Light...?"

"Yeah, Ryuk?"

"... Nah. Never mind."

"What is it?"

"I was just thinking about how unique you are."

"... I'm ever so slightly freaked out. Slightly."

"I didn't mean it like *that* . I mean, not that you're not pretty and all, but--"

"I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm okay, I'm okay--"

"Ah, shut up. What I *meant* was, I've never seen a human use a Death Note like you."

"Oh. Well, that's a relief."

"What, that you're unique in your crazy?"

"... No, Ryuk. I was rather more worried about-- you know what? Never mind. I'm not up to this right now."

---

He kept a bottle of whiskey in his bottom desk drawer. He'd never touched it before, just liked knowing it was there on really bad days.

He was pouring his fourth drink when *it* arrived.

"So," a voice said, "you're the human with my Note, eh?"

It was good that Marie had taken Emily shopping, because he'd never screamed so loud in his life. It was - it was grotesque and monstrous and just *wrong*, and it was like the whole world suddenly lurched. The - *thing*, monster, leant down and sniffed at the whiskey curiously. Its eye sockets seemed to be empty beneath the bandages covering its face, and he couldn't drag his eyes away from



its mouth, trying to decide whether it was bone or mummified skin showing around jagged teeth.

"I've gone crazy," he said. It was almost a relief.

"Sorry," said the monster. "You're perfectly sane."

"I can't be sane," he argued. "I'm hallucinating. Get away from the whiskey."

"Smells interesting," it said, picked the glass carefully with a clawed hand - the other was a hook, James noted queasily, like something straight out of a horror movie or urban legend - and holding it curiously to the light. "So, how are you liking my Note?"

"Your... your..."

"Note," the thing said easily. "Notebook, Death Note, whatever." It turned the glass upside down and caught the liquid in its grinning mouth. Of course it grinned, it was practically a skull beneath those weird bandages. "I'm the original owner. A shinigami."

"A - a what?" He cringed, expected it to be angry at his ignorance or the fact that he had its book or-- he didn't know what he expected.

"Shi-- oh right. Wrong country. A death god."

James found his hands were shaking too hard to unscrew the bottle's cap. He didn't know Japanese or Chinese, or whatever that language was, how would a hallucination of his know it?

"Maybe 'grim reaper' will work better for you?" the thing said. "It's not really important what you call me. All you gotta know is, *that's* my book, and when I write a human's name in it, they die. Or when *you* write a name in it, as the case may be."

"And... you want it back?"

"Want it back?" it repeated, incredulously. "Nah, why would I drop it if I didn't want you to use it?"

"Me?" James said, in a quiet, frightened voice he couldn't quite believe was his. Emily's after a nightmare, sure, but not him - at least, not since he was about ten.

"Well," it said, lifting its hooked hand and scratching at its feathered headdress. "Not *you* specifically. I mean, I meant it to land in Japan, where all the good stuff is going down-- hey, can I have some more of that stuff?" it asked, pointing hopefully at the whiskey bottle.

"Sure," James said instantly, shoving the bottle towards the creature with a speed that probably wasn't polite. Though quite why a... death god would care about politeness he wasn't sure.

"Thanks," it said, biting the top of the bottle's neck off, crunching up the glass and gulping the whiskey down. "Anyway, like I said, I was aiming for Japan, but maybe this'll be better. Kira'd catch on pretty fast, if it fell on his home turf."

"... Kira?" James said.

The 'death god' seemed to look at him, though how it could see through those bandages... if there was even anything under those bandages for it to see with... "Oh right," it said, in the same tone as it had used when it realised it had the wrong country. "Well, okay. Lemme think about this for a minute. The name's Zellogi, by the way."

"Zellogi," James repeated. It was slightly easier, to have a name to put to it. It wasn't like he was ever going to be convinced it was human, but somehow, a name made it easier to bear the sight of it. "If you meant for your book to end up in Japan, why were the rules in English?"

"Tradition?" it suggested, and snickered. "Nah, just kidding. It's-- it's kinda an in-joke. This game's been played before."

" *Game?* " James said. "You think this is some kind of *game* ?"

"Sure," it said. "What else is it gonna be?"

---

"Hey."

"What *now*, Ryuk?"

"You hear about a guy in America - beating up his girlfriend when he died of a heart attack?"

"..."

"No? Funny, I'd have thought you'd be all over that. 'Like the hand of God,' is how the girlfriend supposedly described it."

"..."

---

James listened to the story of Kira with something like horror rising in his chest, clawing at his throat. He's a father, he just can't help imagining Emily walking home from school one day and picking up a notebook and -

Going batshit crazy was how James wanted to describe it. Zellogi talked of Kira with a note of fascination and wonder, but all he could imagine was some poor isolated kid, killing people without realising what he's doing at first, and then convincing himself that he can make the world a better place with even more death. Because if he had to stop and think about what he'd done he wouldn't be able to face it. But when he tried to tell Zellogi this -

"That's not it at all," Zellogi said. "Kira - what've I been telling you? Kira is - was - more of a death god than any of us shinigami. He always knew what he was doing. Your pity'd make him laugh. Besides," it added, looking at James with that expression, the one that said he was being compared to a kid (a human that surpassed

death gods) and didn't measure up. "You've killed too. What's so different?"

"I didn't want to kill anyone," James snapped, guilt twisting his stomach like a fairground ride, sickened by Kira, by the way this monster talked of him and how a book like the one on his desk had destroyed him. Just looking at it now - he wanted to vomit. Or shower. Get the stink of death off his skin somehow.

"Of course you did," Zellogi said. "Why else did you write a name down?"

"This isn't supposed to be real!" James yelled, waving a hand at the notebook, sitting innocently on the desk, at the death god and the bottle near him. "Writing someone's name isn't supposed to kill them! Nothing was supposed to happen! It was just a joke!"

"Just a joke," Zellogi said, dispassionate. "But even if it was just a joke, you'd still have written those names in a book that claimed to kill people."

"I--" James started, but couldn't think about how to finish.

"Man," the death god said. "You humans." It - he? Did death gods bother with something like gender? - said *humans* like it couldn't understand why they thought life and death were so important, like he was complaining about something completely ridiculous.

"I'm not Kira," James said, staring at the notebook, remembering how he couldn't relax until he'd seen it, made sure it was safe - remembering how triumphant he'd felt, writing the name of Annie's asshole boyfriend, before the reality of what he'd done had managed to kick in.

"No need to tell *me* that," Zellogi snorted.

---

"You... dropped another Note?"

"Me? No way. Why? Were you worried I'd have to leave you for someone else?"

"Shut up. What - what the *fuck* is going on here?"

"Can't you guess?"

" *Ryuk* - "

"Don't worry, Light. You'll see."

---

It kept following him, it wouldn't *leave him alone* .

"It's no big deal," it said in the middle of a meeting, idling flicking at his papers. "All humans die, some earlier than others. It's not like the police are gonna arrest you for giving someone a heart attack."

"There a breeze in here?" his boss asked, looking askance at his papers.

"You could probably go up to a cop and spill your guts about it and they wouldn't do anything," it said as they - he - walked home.

"Killing someone with a notebook? Like you said, it's just crazy."

"Shut up," James said through gritted teeth, ignored the startled look an old lady gave him as he walked past.

"Come on, you can't say you've never wanted to kill someone." it said as he tried to sleep, pressing a pillow against his ears. It made a noise like a crow laughing, a kind of 'kyeh kek kek' noise. "Well, obviously you have, you've already done it."

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," he whispered fiercely and found his hand desperately seeking his wife's in the dark.

"What if someone hurts your females?" it said as he sat at the kitchen table, standing behind his oblivious daughter. "Wouldn't you want the notebook then?"

James swallowed hard, watching the way its gaze went from the little girl in front of it to the woman offering him coffee with a worried look.

"There's no punishment for using it," it said as he pushed Emily on the swings in the park. "I'm not gonna take your soul; nothing happens to you after you die."

"It's *wrong*," James said, quick and fierce and hidden under the shrieks of ' *higher, daddy, higher!* '

"If it's so wrong," it said as he ate dinner with Marie, who looked beautiful in her new dress and frowned worriedly at him throughout the meal, "why'd you kill that guy for hurting your friend? Why didn't you let her die?"

He closed his eyes, ignored Marie's quiet inquiries as to what was wrong, did he have a headache, should they go home?

"I don't believe killing someone is ever the right thing to do," he told it, sitting in his study in the middle of the night, back turned to the desk and the notebook (waiting) in the top drawer.

"Not even when they would have killed your friend?" it said slyly. "Not even if it would save your life? Not even if it would save your family's lives?" It said family like it was a foreign word, like it had heard it and so knew how to pronounce it, but didn't know how to use it properly.

"Is that how Kira justified himself?" James heard himself ask.

Zellogi made that laughing noise he was beginning to hate. "Why would Kira justify himself? That would imply he needed explanation, right?"

"Well, was he a man or wasn't he?" James snapped, the word *kira* curdling in his mouth, the thought of - *kira's shadow stretched all over the world, so deep and far-reaching people got down on their knees and prayed to just another human among millions of humans.* "People need explanations for their actions."

"Kira was a boy," the monster said, and James wanted to feel the pity and horror he had when he first heard that, but couldn't find it under all his anger and weariness. "But he was more than that too. You can't stop a fire from burning, as Ryuk might say."

"You can stop a fire from starting," James said.

---

"Anthony."

"Oh hell."

"Anthony, I want you to research something for me."

"... Yeah boss."

"The death of a man named David Crawford. I want everything on him and his girlfriend, Anna Sommerlee - friends, family, hobbies, everything."

"I thought his death was supposed to be because of an undetectable pre-existing heart condition?"

"Exacerbated by excessive consumption of alcohol? Yes. Nevertheless, I want you to investigate."

"But not as Kira."

"No. This is hardly a case, is it?"

"So why are you putting me on it?"

"Did you say something, Anthony?"

"No! Nothing!"

"Good."

"... Have I ever told you how inexpressibly creepy you can be?"

"Get to work."

---

Zellogi just couldn't understand it. Humans killed each other all the time over the most ridiculous things, like having more paper with somebody's face on it, or because the human they normally did the 'sex' thing with went and did it with somebody else, or because they had a particular flag and the other person had a different flag, and blah blah blah. Some of the humans in 'prison', well, they killed in ways that made Zellogi's brain flatline.

And Kira had never killed in his life before he got a Death Note - granted, it was a pretty short life, Kira was what, barely grown then? - and still ended up killing thousands. Hundreds of thousands. It wasn't like the shinigami realm kept records - save the rules, and most of those in Justin's head, so if Justin ever crumbled that was pretty much it - so he'd just kinda assumed that sort of crazy was the typical response to a Death Note. There'd been four Kiras after all. Five? Did both females count? Whatever - whenever a new minion was needed, Kira had one willing to use the notebook like he did.

Maybe, he thought, staring at James Bryant's corpse, it wasn't something about the Death Note at all but something about Kira.

When Zellogi had watched Kira's rise, all he had really seen was how the humans kept dying, like in that flu pandemic after the war with the poppies, or that time with the rats - overzealous shinigami could be a pain - but evidently there was more to it than he'd thought.

How had Ryuk put it, when he tried to explain what it was like down in Kira's world, at the centre of all his power? The cult of personality? The way humans would follow the majority where ideals were concerned? The strength of one person's will, overpowering so many others simply because he *wanted* it more, far more than they wanted to fight him. Humans learnt to bow and then keep bowing because their memories were short and they tricked themselves into believing they did it willingly. Something like that.



So maybe without Kira demonstrating what to do, Death Notes were just books that killed people, instead of weapons that could hold the world hostage. Or maybe you needed a certain type of human and he'd just got the wrong one.

He looked at the ashes of his notebook on the desk. Good thing he'd traded it from Gukku for an apple. He looked from dead man to notebook-ashes and back again.

How had Ryuk managed to get *Kira* on his first try? This playing with humans thing was trickier than it looked.

Zellogi scowled, or gave the impression of scowling. He was - was jealous the right word? *Zēlos*, *zelosus*, *gelos*? Envious, then. *Videre*, *invidere*, *invidia*. To see, to look askance. He wanted a Kira. It didn't have to be *the* Kira - Ryuk would complain, and Kira himself was probably too used to Ryuk to want to bother training a new shinigami to his whims - just some human with a fraction of his ability and will and shine. It wasn't fair that Ryuk got the interesting human and all the fun.

He'd so wanted his try to be a success.

---

"I found something. Guy named James Bryant. Former boyfriend of Anna's; still a close friend. She was calling him at the time of the attack."

"Are you following him?"

"I was."

"Listen carefully, did he have a black notebook he took particular care of?"

"... Really? Does that sort of thing matter? Rumour in the network has it *you're* never without an apple."

"Anthony. Don't question me on this, just answer. It doesn't have to make sense to you."

"He's dead, boss. Died of a heart attack. Saw him set a book on a fire moments before, though, now that you mention it."

"I see."

"Yeah? So what was the big deal? Can I get back to proper cases now?"

Click.

"... Sometimes I hate my job."

---

A/N: More of a filler chapter than anything.... What, you thought James Bryant was important?